



Philip Durham
Evans



THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

GIFT OF

Philip C. Durham

565

8 7 whiney

**The
Great Western
Special**

The
Great Western
Special

The Great Western Special

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER



3 Complete Western Novels **3**

A. L. BURT COMPANY

Publishers

New York

Chicago

PRINTED
IN U.S.A.

Copyright 1911
Outing Publishing Company
Entered at Stationers' Hall
London, England
All Rights Reserved

Copyright 1912
Outing Publishing Company

Copyright 1913
Outing Publishing Company

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

PS
3537
S467.5g

Contents



1. The Two-Gun Man 1911 NY
2. The Coming of the Law 1912 NY
3. The Trail to Yesterday 1913 NY

THE TWO-GUN MAN



CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE STRANGER AT DRY BOTTOM	9
II. THE STRANGER SHOOTS	19
III. THE CABIN IN THE FLAT	28
IV. A "DIFFERENT GIRL"	46
V. THE MAN OF DRY BOTTOM	68
VI. AT THE TWO DIAMOND	76
VII. THE MEASURE OF A MAN	84
VIII. THE FINDING OF THE ORPHAN	105
IX. WOULD YOU BE A "CHARACTER"?	114
X. DISAPPEARANCE OF THE ORPHAN	126
XI. A TOUCH OF LOCAL COLOR	138
XII. THE STORY BEGINS	150
XIII. "DO YOU SMOKE?"	167
XIV. ON THE EDGE OF THE PLATEAU	179
XV. A FREE HAND	210
XVI. LEVIATT TAKES A STEP	219
XVII. A BREAK IN THE STORY	244
XVIII. THE DIM TRAIL	263
XIX. THE SHOT IN THE DARK	276
XX. LOVE AND A RIFLE	286
XXI. THE PROMISE	298
XXII. KEEPING A PROMISE	305
XXIII. AT THE EDGE OF THE COTTONWOOD	331
XXIV. THE END OF THE STORY	344

THE TWO-GUN MAN

CHAPTER I

THE STRANGER AT DRY BOTTOM

FROM the crest of Three Mile Slope the man on the pony could see the town of Dry Bottom straggling across the gray floor of the flat, its low, squat buildings looking like so many old boxes blown there by an idle wind, or unceremoniously dumped there by a careless fate and left, regardless, to carry out the scheme of desolation.

Apparently the rider was in no hurry, for, as the pony topped the rise and the town burst suddenly into view, the little ani-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

mal pricked up its ears and quickened its pace, only to feel the reins suddenly tighten and to hear the rider's voice gruffly discouraging haste. Therefore, the pony pranced gingerly, alert, champing the bit impatiently, picking its way over the lumpy hills of stone and cactus, but holding closely to the trail.

The man lounged in the saddle, his strong, well-knit body swaying gracefully, his eyes, shaded by the brim of his hat, narrowed with slight mockery and interest as he gazed steadily at the town that lay before him.

"I reckon that must be Dry Bottom," he said finally, mentally taking in its dimensions. "If that's so, I've only got twenty miles to go."

Half way down the slope, and still a mile and a half from the town, the rider drew the pony to a halt. He dropped the reins over the high pommel of the saddle, drew out his two guns, one after the other, rolled the cylinders, and returned the guns to their holsters. He had heard something of Dry Bottom's reputation and in examining his

THE STRANGER

pistols he was merely preparing himself for an emergency. For a moment after he had replaced the weapons he sat quietly in the saddle. Then he shook out the reins, spoke to the pony, and the little animal set forward at a slow lope.

An ironic traveler, passing through Dry Bottom in its younger days, before civic spirit had definitely centered its efforts upon things nomenclatural, had hinted that the town should be known as "dry" because of the fact that while it boasted seven buildings, four were saloons; and that "bottom" might well be used as a suffix, because, in the nature of things, a town of seven buildings, four of which were saloons, might reasonably expect to descend to the very depths of moral iniquity.

The ironic traveler had spoken with prophetic wisdom. Dry Bottom was trying as best it knew how to wallow in the depths of sin. Unlovely, soiled, desolate of verdure, dumped down upon a flat of sand in a treeless waste, amid cactus, crabbed yucca, scorpions, horned toads, and rattlesnakes, Dry

THE TWO-GUN MAN

Bottom had forgotten its morals, subverted its principles, and neglected its God.

As the rider approached to within a few hundred yards of the edge of town he became aware of a sudden commotion. He reined in his pony, allowing it to advance at a walk, while with alert eyes he endeavored to search out the cause of the excitement. He did not have long to watch for the explanation.

A man had stepped out of the door of one of the saloons, slowly walking twenty feet away from it toward the center of the street. Immediately other men had followed. But these came only to a point just outside the door. For some reason which was not apparent to the rider, they were giving the first man plenty of room.

The rider was now able to distinguish the faces of the men in the group, and he gazed with interested eyes at the man who had first issued from the door of the saloon.

The man was tall—nearly as tall as the rider—and in his every movement seemed sure of himself. He was young, seemingly

THE STRANGER

about thirty-five, with shifty, insolent eyes and a hard mouth whose lips were just now curved into a self-conscious smile.

The rider had now approached to within fifty feet of the man, halting his pony at the extreme end of the hitching rail that skirted the front of the saloon. He sat carelessly in the saddle, his gaze fixed on the man.

The men who had followed the first man out, to the number of a dozen, were apparently deeply interested, though plainly skeptical. A short, fat man, who was standing near the saloon door, looked on with a half-sneer. Several others were smiling blandly. A tall man on the extreme edge of the crowd, near the rider, was watching the man in the street gravely. Other men had allowed various expressions to creep into their faces. But all were silent.

Not so the man in the street. Plainly, here was conceit personified, and yet a conceit mingled with a maddening insolence. His expression told all that this thing which he was about to do was worthy of the closest

THE TWO-GUN MAN

attention. He was the axis upon which the interest of the universe revolved.

Certainly he knew of the attention he was attracting. Men were approaching from the other end of the street, joining the group in front of the saloon—which the rider now noticed was called the “Silver Dollar.” The newcomers were inquisitive; they spoke in low tones to the men who had arrived before them, gravely inquiring the cause.

But the man in the street seemed not disturbed by his rapidly swelling audience. He stood in the place he had selected, his insolent eyes roving over the assembled company, his thin, expressive lips opening a very little to allow words to filter through them.

“Gents,” he said, “you’re goin’ to see some shootin’! I told you in the Silver Dollar that I could keep a can in the air while I put five holes in it. There’s some of you gassed about bein’ showed, not believin’. An’ now I’m goin’ to show you!”

He reached down and took up a can that

THE STRANGER

had lain at his feet, removing the red lithographed label, which had a picture of a large tomato in the center of it. The can was revealed, naked and shining in the white sunlight. The man placed the can in his left hand and drew his pistol with the right.

Then he tossed the can into the air. While it still rose his weapon exploded, the can shook spasmodically and turned clear over. Then in rapid succession followed four other explosions, the last occurring just before the can reached the ground. The man smiled, still holding the smoking weapon in his hand.

The tall man on the extreme edge of the group now stepped forward and examined the can, while several other men crowded about to look. There were exclamations of surprise. It was curious to see how quickly enthusiasm and awe succeeded skepticism.

"He's done it, boys!" cried the tall man, holding the can aloft. "Bored it in five places!" He stood erect, facing the crowd. "I reckon that's some shootin'!" He now

THE TWO-GUN MAN

threw a glance of challenge and defiance about him. "I've got a hundred dollars to say that there ain't another man in this here town can do it!"

Several men tried, but none equaled the first man's performance. Many of the men could not hit the can at all. The first man watched their efforts, sneers twitching his lips as man after man failed.

Presently all had tried. Watching closely, the rider caught an expression of slight disappointment on the tall man's face. The rider was the only man who had not yet tried his skill with the pistol, and the man in the street now looked up at him, his eyes glittering with an insolent challenge. As it happened, the rider glanced at the shooter at the instant the latter had turned to look up at him. Their eyes met fairly, the shooter's conveying a silent taunt. The rider smiled, slight mockery glinting his eyes.

Apparently the stranger did not care to try his skill. He still sat lazily in the saddle, his gaze wandering languidly over the crowd. The latter plainly expected him to

THE STRANGER

take part in the shooting match and was impatient over his inaction.

"Two-gun," sneered a man who stood near the saloon door. "I wonder what he totes them two guns for?"

The shooter heard and turned toward the man who had spoken, his lips wreathed satirically.

"I reckon he wouldn't shoot nothin' with them," he said, addressing the man who had spoken.

Several men laughed. The tall man who had revealed interest before now raised a hand, checking further comment.

"That offer of a hundred to the man who can beat that shootin' still goes," he declared. "An' I'm taking off the condition. The man that tries don't have to belong to Dry Bottom. No stranger is barred!"

The stranger's glance again met the shooter's. The latter grinned felinely. Then the rider spoke. The crowd gave him its polite attention.

"I reckon you-all think you've seen some shootin'," he said in a steady, even voice,

THE TWO-GUN MAN

singularly free from boast. "But I reckon you ain't seen any real shootin'." He turned to the tall, grave-faced man. "I ain't got no hundred," he said, "but I'm goin' to show you."

He still sat in the saddle. But now with an easy motion he swung down and hitched his pony to the rail.

CHAPTER II

THE STRANGER SHOTS

THE stranger seemed taller on the ground than in the saddle and an admirable breadth of shoulder and slenderness of waist told eloquently of strength. He could not have been over twenty-five or six. Yet certain hard lines about his mouth, the glint of mockery in his eyes, the pronounced forward thrust of the chin, the indefinable force that seemed to radiate from him, told the casual observer that here was a man who must be approached with care.

But apparently the shooter saw no such signs. In the first glance that had been exchanged between the two men there had been a lack of ordinary cordiality. And

THE TWO-GUN MAN

now, as the rider slid down from his pony and advanced toward the center of the street, the shooter's lips curled. Writhing through them came slow-spoken words.

"You runnin' sheep, stranger?"

The rider's lips smiled, but his eyes were steady and cold. In them shone a flash of cold humor. He stood, quietly contemplating his insulter.

Smiles appeared on the faces of several of the onlookers. The tall man with the grave face watched with a critical eye. The insult had been deliberate, and many men crouched, plainly expecting a serious outcome. But the stranger made no move toward his guns, and when he answered he might have been talking about the weather, so casual was his tone.

"I reckon you think you're a plum man," he said quietly. "But if you are, you ain't showed it much—buttin' in with that there wise observation. An' there's some men who think that shootin' at a man is more excitin' than shootin' at a can."

There was a grim quality in his voice now.

THE STRANGER SHOOTS

He leaned forward slightly, his eyes cold and alert. The shooter sneered experimentally. Again the audience smiled.

But the tall man now stepped forward. "You've made your play, stranger," he said quietly. "I reckon it's up to you to make good."

"Correct," agreed the stranger. "I'm goin' to show you some real shootin'. You got another can?"

Some one dived into the Silver Dollar and returned in a flash with another tomato can. This the stranger took, removing the label, as the shooter had done. Then, smiling, he took a position in the center of the street, the can in his right hand.

He did not draw his weapon as the shooter had done, but stood loosely in his place, his right hand still grasping the can, the left swinging idly by his side. Apparently he did not mean to shoot. Sneers reached the faces of several men in the crowd. The shooter growled, "Fourflush."

There was a flash as the can rose twenty feet in the air, propelled by the right hand

THE TWO-GUN MAN

of the stranger. As the can reached the apex of its climb the stranger's right hand descended and grasped the butt of the weapon at his right hip. There was a flash as the gun came out; a gasp of astonishment from the watchers. The can was arrested in the first foot of its descent by the shock of the first bullet striking it. It jumped up and out and again began its interrupted fall, only to stop dead still in the air as another bullet struck it. There was an infinitesimal pause, and then twice more the can shivered and jumped. No man in the crowd but could tell that the bullets were striking true.

The can was still ten feet in the air and well out from the stranger. The latter whipped his weapon to a level, the bullet striking the can and driving it twenty feet from him. Then it dropped. But when it was within five feet of the ground the stranger's gun spoke again. The can leaped, careened sideways, and fell, shattered, to the street, thirty feet distant from the stranger.

THE STRANGER SHOOTS

Several men sprang forward to examine it.

"Six times!" ejaculated the tall man in an awed tone. "An' he didn't pull his gun till he'd throwed the can!"

He approached the stranger, drawing him confidentially aside. The crowd slowly dispersed, loudly proclaiming the stranger's ability with the six-shooter. The latter took his honors lightly, the mocking smile again on his face.

"I'm lookin' for a man who can shoot," said the tall man, when the last man of the crowd had disappeared into the saloon.

The stranger smiled. "I reckon you've just seen some shootin'," he returned.

The tall man smiled mirthlessly. "You particular about what you shoot at?" he inquired.

The stranger's lips straightened coldly. "I used to have that habit," he returned evenly.

"Hard luck?" queried the tall man.

"I'm rollin' in wealth," stated the stranger, with an ironic sneer.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

The tall man's eyes glittered. "Where you from?" he questioned.

"You c'n have three guesses," returned the stranger, his eyes narrowing with the mockery that the tall man had seen in them before.

The tall man adopted a placative tone. "I ain't wantin' to butt into your business," he said. "I was wantin' to find out if any one around here knowed you."

"This town didn't send any reception committee to meet me, did they?" smiled the stranger.

"Correct," said the tall man. He leaned closer. "You willin' to work your guns for me for a hundred a month?"

The stranger looked steadily into the tall man's eyes.

"You've been right handy askin' questions," he said. "Mebbe you'll answer some. What's your name?"

"Stafford," returned the tall man. "I'm managin' the Two Diamond, over on the Ute."

The stranger's eyelashes flickered slightly.

THE STRANGER SHOOTS

His eyes narrowed quizzically. "What you wantin' of a gun-man?" he asked.

"Rustler," returned the other shortly.

The stranger smiled. "Figger on shootin' him?" he questioned.

Stafford hesitated. "Well, no," he returned. "That is, not until I'm sure I've got the right one." He seized the stranger's arm in a confidential grip. "You see," he explained, "I don't know just where I'm at. There's been a rustler workin' on the herd, an' I ain't been able to get close enough to find out who it is. But rustlin' has got to be stopped. I've sent over to Raton to get a man named Ned Ferguson, who's been workin' for Sid Tucker, of the Lazy J. Tucker wrote me quite a while back, tellin' me that this man was plum slick at nosin' out rustlers. He was to come to the Two Diamond two weeks ago. But he ain't showed up, an' I've about concluded that he ain't comin'. An' so I come over to Dry Bottom to find a man."

"You've found one," smiled the stranger.

Stafford drew out a handful of double

THE TWO-GUN MAN

eagles and pressed them into the other's hand. "I'm goin' over to the Two Diamond now," he said. "You'd better wait a day or two, so's no one will get wise. Come right to me, like you was wantin' a job."

He started toward the hitching rail for his pony, hesitated and then walked back.

"I didn't get your name," he smiled.

The stranger's eyes glittered humorously. "It's Ferguson," he said quietly.

Stafford's eyes widened with astonishment. Then his right hand went out and grasped the other's.

"Well, now," he said warmly, "that's what I call luck."

Ferguson smiled. "Mebbe it's luck," he returned. "But before I go over to work for you there's got to be an understandin'. I c'n shoot some," he continued, looking steadily at Stafford, "but I ain't runnin' around the country shootin' men without cause. I'm willin' to try an' find your rustler for you, but I ain't shootin' him—unless he goes to crowdin' me mighty close."

"I'm agreein' to that," returned Stafford.

THE STRANGER SHOOTS

He turned again, looking back over his shoulder. "You'll sure be over?" he questioned.

"I'll be there the day after to-morrow," stated Ferguson.

He turned and went into the Silver Dollar. Stafford mounted his pony and loped rapidly out of town.

CHAPTER III

THE CABIN IN THE FLAT

IT was the day appointed by Ferguson for his presence at the Two Diamond ranch, and he was going to keep his word. Three hours out of Dry Bottom he had struck the Ute trail and was loping his pony through a cottonwood that skirted the river. It was an enchanted country through which he rode; a land of vast distances, of white sunlight, blue skies, and clear, pure air. Mountains rose in the distances, their snowcapped peaks showing above the clouds like bald rock spires above the calm level of the sea. Over the mountains swam the sun, its lower rim slowly disappearing behind the peaks, throwing off broad white shafts of light that soon began to dim as

THE CABIN IN THE FLAT

vari-colors, rising in a slumberous haze like a gauze veil, mingled with them.

Ferguson's gaze wandered from the trail to the red buttes that fringed the river. He knew this world; there was no novelty here for him. He knew the lava beds, looming gray and dead beneath the foothills; he knew the grotesque rock shapes that seemed to hint of a mysterious past. Nature had not altered her face. On the broad levels were the yellow tinted lines that told of the presence of soap-weed, the dark lines that betrayed the mesquite, the saccatone belts that marked the little guillies. Then there were the barrancas, the arid stretches where the sage-brush and the cactus grew. Snaky octilla dotted the space; the crabbed yucca had not lost its ugliness.

Ferguson looked upon the world with un-seeing eyes. He had lived here long and the country had not changed. It would never change. Nothing ever changed here but the people.

But he himself had not changed. Twenty-seven years in this country was a long

THE TWO-GUN MAN

time, for here life was not measured by age, but by experience. Looking back over the years he could see that he was living to-day as he had lived last year, as he had lived during the last decade—a hard life, but having its compensations.

His coming to the Two Diamond ranch was merely another of those incidents that, during the past year, had broken the monotony of range life for him. He had had some success in breaking up a band of cattle thieves which had made existence miserable for Sid Tucker, his employer, and the latter had recommended him to Stafford. The promise of high wages had been attractive, and so he had come. He had not expected to surprise any one. When during his conversation with the tall man in Dry Bottom he had discovered that the latter was the man for whom he was to work he had been surprised himself. But he had not revealed his surprise. Experience and association with men who kept their emotions pretty much to themselves had taught him the value of repression when in the presence of others.

THE CABIN IN THE FLAT

But alone he allowed his emotions full play. There was no one to see, no one to hear, and the silence and the distances, and the great, swimming blue sky would not tell.

Stafford's action in coming to Dry Bottom for a gunfighter had puzzled him not a little. Apparently the Two Diamond manager was intent upon the death of the rustler he had mentioned. He had been searching for a man who could "shoot," he had said. Ferguson had interpreted this to mean that he desired to employ a gunfighter who would not scruple to kill any man he pointed out, whether innocent or guilty. He had had some experience with unscrupulous ranch managers, and he had admired them very little. Therefore, during the ride today, his lips had curled sarcastically many times.

Riding through a wide clearing in the cottonwood, he spoke a thought that had troubled him not a little since he had entered Stafford's employ.

"Why," he said, as he rode along, sitting

THE TWO-GUN MAN

carelessly in the saddle, "he's wantin' to make a gunfighter out of me. But I reckon I ain't goin' to shoot no man unless I'm pretty sure he's gunnin' for me." His lips curled ironically. "I wonder what the boys of the Lazy J would think if they knowed that a guy was tryin' to make a gunfighter out of their old straw boss. I reckon they'd think that guy was loco—or a heap mistaken in his man. But I'm seein' this thing through. I ain't ridin' a hundred miles just to take a look at the man who's hirin' me. It'll be a change. An' when I go back to the Lazy J——"

It was not the pony's fault. Neither was it Ferguson's. The pony was experienced; behind his slant eyes was stored a world of horse-wisdom that had pulled him and his rider through many tight places. And Ferguson had ridden horses all his life; he would not have known what to do without one.

But the pony stumbled. The cause was a prairie-dog hole, concealed under a clump of matted mesquite. Ferguson lunged for-

THE CABIN IN THE FLAT

ward, caught at the saddle horn, missed it, and pitched head-foremost out of the saddle, turning completely over and alighting upon his feet. He stood erect for an instant, but the momentum had been too great. He went down, and when he tried to rise a twinge of pain in his right ankle brought a grimace to his face. He arose and hopped over to a flat rock, near where his pony now stood grazing as though nothing had happened.

Drawing off his boot, Ferguson made a rapid examination of the ankle. It was inflamed and painful, but not broken. He believed he could see it swelling. He rubbed it, hoping to assuage the pain. The woolen sock interfered with the rubbing, and he drew it off.

For a few minutes he worked with the ankle, but to little purpose. He finally became convinced that it was a bad sprain, and he looked up, scowling. The pony turned an inquiring eye upon him, and he grinned, suddenly smitten with the humor of the situation.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"You ain't got no call to look so dog-goned innocent about it," he said. "If you'd been tendin' to your business, you wouldn't have stepped into no damned gopher hole."

The pony moved slowly away, and he looked whimsically after it, remarking: "Mebbe if I'd been tendin' to my business it wouldn't have happened, either." He spoke again to the pony. "I reckon you know that too, Mustard. You're some wise."

The animal was now at some little distance from the rock upon which he was sitting. He arose, hobbling on one foot toward it, carrying the discarded boot in his hand. He thought of riding with the foot bare. At the Two Diamond he was sure to find some sort of liniment which, with the help of a bandage, would materially assist nature in——

He was passing a filmy mesquite clump—the bare foot swinging wide. There was a warning rattle; a sharp thrust of a flat, brown head.

Ferguson halted in astonishment, almost

THE CABIN IN THE FLAT

knocked off his balance with the suddenness of the attack. He still held the boot, his fingers gripping it tightly. He raised it, with a purely involuntary motion, as though to hurl it at his insidious enemy. But he did not. The arm fell to his side, and his face slowly whitened. He stared dully and uncomprehendingly at the sinuous shape that was slipping noiselessly away through the matted grass.

Somehow, he had never thought of being bitten by a rattler. He had seen so many of them that he had come to look upon them only as targets at which he might shoot when he thought he needed practice. And now he was bitten. The unreality of the incident surprised him. He looked around at the silent hills, at the sun that swam above the mountain peaks, at the great, vast arc of sky that yawned above him. Hills, sky, and sun seemed also unreal. It was as though he had been suddenly thrust into a land of dreams.

But presently the danger of the situation burst upon him, and he lived once more

THE TWO-GUN MAN

in the reality. He looked down at his foot. A livid, pin-point wound showed in the flesh beside the arch. A tiny stream of blood was oozing from it. He forgot the pain of the sprained ankle and stood upon both feet, his body suddenly rigid, his face red with a sudden, consuming anger, shaking a tense fist at the disappearing rattler.

"You damned sneak!" he shouted shrilly.

In the same instant he had drawn one of his heavy guns and swung it over his head. Its crashing report brought a sudden swishing from beneath the grass, and he hopped over closer and sent three more bullets into the threshing brown body. He stood over it for a moment, his teeth showing in a savage snarl.

"You won't bite any one else, damn you!" he shouted.

The impotence of this conduct struck him immediately. He flushed and drooped his head, a grim smile slowly wearing down his expression of panic. Seldom did he allow his emotions to reveal themselves so plainly. But the swiftness of the rattler's

THE CABIN IN THE FLAT

attack, the surprise when he had not been thinking of such a thing, the fact that he was far from help and that his life was in danger—all had a damaging effect upon his self-control. And yet the smile showed that he was still master of himself.

Very deliberately he returned to the rock upon which he had been sitting, ripping off his coat and tearing away the sleeve of his woollen shirt. Twisting the sleeve into the form of a rude rope, he tied it loosely around his leg, just above the ankle. Then he thrust his knife between the improvised rope and the leg, forming a crude tourniquet. He twisted the knife until tears of pain formed in his eyes. Then he fastened the knife by tucking the haft under the rope. His movements had been very deliberate, but sure, and in a few minutes he hobbled to his pony and swung into the saddle.

He had seen men who had been bitten by rattlers—had seen them die. And he knew that if he did not get help within half an hour there would be little use of doing any-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

thing further. In half an hour the virus would have so great a grip upon him that it would be practically useless to apply any of the antidotes commonly known to the inhabitants of the country.

Inquiries that he had made at Dry Bottom had resulted in the discovery that the Two Diamond ranch was nearly thirty miles from the town. If he had averaged eight miles an hour he had covered about twenty-four miles of the distance. That would still leave about six. And he could not hope to ride those six miles in time to get any benefit from an antidote.

His lips straightened, he stared grimly at a ridge of somber hills that fringed the skyline. They had told him back in Dry Bottom that the Two Diamond ranch was somewhere in a big basin below those hills.

"I reckon I won't get there, after all," he said, commenting aloud.

Thereafter he rode grimly on, keeping a good grip upon himself—for he had seen men bitten by rattlers who had lost their self-control—and they had not been good to

THE CABIN IN THE FLAT

look upon. Much depended upon coolness; somewhere he had heard that it was a mistake for a bitten man to exert himself in the first few minutes following a bite; exertion caused the virus to circulate more rapidly through the system. And so he rode at an even pace, carefully avoiding the rough spots, though keeping as closely to the trail as possible.

"If it hadn't been a diamond-back—an' a five-foot one—this rope that I've got around my leg might be enough to fool him," he said once, aloud. "But I reckon he's got me." His eyes lighted savagely for an instant. "But I got him, too. Had the nerve to think that he could get away after throwin' his hooks into me."

Presently his eyes caught the saffron light that glowed in the western sky. He laughed with a grim humor. "I've heard tell that a snake don't die till sundown—much as you hurt him. If that's so, an' I don't get to where I c'n get some help, I reckon it'll be a stand off between him an' me as to who's goin' first."

THE TWO-GUN MAN

A little later he drew Mustard to a halt, sitting very erect in the saddle and fixing his gaze upon a tall cottonwood tree that rose near the trail. His heart was racing madly, and in spite of his efforts, he felt himself swaying from side to side. He had often seen a rattler doing that—flat, ugly head raised above his coiled body, forked tongue shooting out, his venomous eyes glittering, the head and the part of the body rising above the coils swaying gracefully back and forth. Yes, gracefully, for in spite of his hideous aspect, there was a certain horrible ease of movement about a rattler—a slippery, sinuous motion that partly revealed reserve strength, and hinted at repressed energy.

Many times, while watching them, he had been fascinated by their grace, and now, sitting in the saddle, he caught himself wondering if the influence of a bite were great enough to cause the person bitten to imitate the snake. He laughed when this thought struck him and drove his spurs sharply against Mustard's flanks, riding forward

THE CABIN IN THE FLAT

past the cottonwood at which he had been staring.

"Hell!" he ejaculated, as he passed the tree, "what a fool notion."

But he could not banish the "notion" from his mind, and five minutes later, when he tried again to sit steadily, he found the swaying more pronounced. The saddle seemed to rock with him, and even by jamming his uninjured foot tightly into the ox-bow stirrup he could not stop swaying.

"Mebbe I won't get very far," he said, realizing that the poison had entered his system, and that presently it would riot in his veins, "but I'm goin' on until I stop. I wouldn't want that damned rattler to know that he'd made me quit so soon."

He urged Mustard to a faster pace, even while realizing that speed was hopeless. He could never reach the Two Diamond. Convinced of this, he halted the pony again, swaying in the saddle and holding, for the first time, to the pommel in an effort to steady himself. But he still swayed. He laughed mockingly.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"Now, what do you think of that?" he said, addressing the silence. "You might think I was plum tenderfoot an' didn't know how to ride a horse proper."

He urged the pony onward again, and for some little time rode with bowed head, trying to keep himself steady by watching the trail. He rode through a little clearing, where the grass was matted and some naked rocks reared aloft. Near a clump of sage-brush he saw a sudden movement—a rattler trying to slip away unnoticed. But the snake slid into Ferguson's vision and with a sneer of hate he drew one of his weapons and whipped it over his head, its roar awakening echoes in the wood. Twice, three times, the crashing report sounded. But the rattler whisked away and disappeared into the grass—apparently uninjured.

For an instant Ferguson scowled. Then a grin of mockery reached his flushed face.

"I reckon I'm done," he said. "Can't even hit a rattler no more, an' him a brother or sister of that other one." A delirious

THE CABIN IN THE FLAT

light flashed suddenly in his eyes, and he seemed on the point of dismounting. "I'll cert'nly smash you some!" he said, speaking to the snake—which he could no longer see. "I ain't goin' to let no snake bite me an' get away with it!"

But he now smiled guiltily, embarrassment shining in his eyes. "I reckon that wasn't the snake that bit you, Ferguson," he said. "The one that bit you is back on the trail. He ain't goin' to die till sundown. Not till sundown," he repeated mechanically, grimly; "Ferguson ain't goin' to die till sundown."

He rode on, giving no attention to the pony whatever, but letting the reins fall and holding to the pommel of the saddle. His face was burning now, his hands were twitching, and an unnatural gleam had come into his eyes.

"Ferguson got hooked by a rattler!" he suddenly exclaimed, hilarity in his voice. "He run plum into that reptile; tried to walk on him with a bare foot." The laugh was checked as suddenly as it had come, and

THE TWO-GUN MAN

a grim quality entered his voice. "But Ferguson wasn't no tenderfoot—he didn't scare none. He went right on, not sayin' anything. You see, he was reckonin' to be man's size."

He rode on a little way, and as he entered another clearing a rational gleam came into his eyes. "I'm still a-goin' it," he muttered.

A shadow darkened the trail; he heard Mustard whinny. He became aware of a cabin in front of him; heard an exclamation; saw dimly the slight figure of a woman, sitting on a small porch; as through a mist, he saw her rise and approach him, standing on the edge of the porch, looking at him.

He smiled, bowing low to her over his pony's mane.

"I shot him, ma'am," he said gravely, "but he ain't goin' to die till sundown."

As from some great distance a voice seemed to come to him. "Mercy!" it said. "What is wrong? Who is shot?"

"Why, the snake, ma'am," he returned thickly. He slid down from his pony and

THE CABIN IN THE FLAT

staggered to the edge of the porch, leaning against one of the slender posts and hanging dizzily on. "You see, ma'am, that damned rattler got Ferguson. But Ferguson ain't reckonin' on dyin' till sundown. He couldn't let no snake get the best of him."

He saw the woman start toward him, felt her hands on his arms, helping him upon the porch. Then he felt her hands on his shoulders, felt them pressing him down. He felt dimly that there was a chair under him, and he sank into it, leaning back and stretching himself out full length. A figure flitted before him and presently there was a sharp pain in his foot. He started out of the chair, and was abruptly shoved back into it. Then the figure leaned over him, prying his jaws apart with some metal like object and pouring something down his throat. He choked as he swallowed, vainly trying to brush away the object.

"You're a hell of a snake," he said savagely. Then the world blurred dizzily, and he drifted into oblivion.

CHAPTER IV

A "DIFFERENT GIRL"

FERGUSON had no means of knowing how long he was unconscious, but when he awoke the sun had gone down and the darkening shadows had stolen into the clearing near the cabin. He still sat in the chair on the porch. He tried to lift his injured foot and found to his surprise that some weight seemed to be on it. He struggled to an erect position, looking down. His foot had been bandaged, and the weight that he had thought was upon it was not a weight at all, but the hands of a young woman.

She sat on the porch floor, the injured foot in her lap, and she had just finished bandaging it. Beside her on the porch floor

A "DIFFERENT GIRL"

was a small black medicine case, a sponge, some yards of white cloth, and a tin wash basin partly filled with water.

He had a hazy recollection of the young woman; he knew it must have been she that he had seen when he had ridden up to the porch. He also had a slight remembrance of having spoken to her, but what the words were he could not recall. He stretched himself painfully. The foot pained frightfully, and his face felt hot and feverish; he was woefully weak and his nerves were tingling—but he was alive.

The girl looked up at his movement. Her lips opened and she held up a warning hand.

"You are to be very quiet," she admonished.

He smiled weakly and obeyed her, leaning back, his gaze on the slate-blue of the sky. She still worked at the foot, fastening the bandage; he could feel her fingers as they passed lightly over it. He did not move, feeling a deep contentment.

Presently she arose, placed the foot gently down, and entered the house. With

THE TWO-GUN MAN

closed eyes he lay in the chair, listening to her step as she walked about in the house. He lay there a long time, and when he opened his eyes again he knew that he must have been asleep, for the night had come and a big yellow moon was rising over a rim of distant hills. Turning his head slightly, he saw the interior of one of the rooms of the cabin—the kitchen, for he saw a stove and some kettles and pans hanging on the wall and near the window a table, over which was spread a cloth. A small kerosene lamp stood in the center of the table, its rays glimmering weakly through the window. He raised one hand and passed it over his forehead. There was still some fever, but he felt decidedly better than when he had awakened the first time.

Presently he heard a light step and became aware of some one standing near him. He knew it was the girl, even before she spoke, for he had caught the rustle of her dress.

“Are you awake,” she questioned.

“Why, yes, ma’am,” he returned. He

A "DIFFERENT GIRL"

turned to look at her, but in the darkness he could not see her face.

"Do you feel like eating anything?" she asked.

He grinned ruefully in the darkness. "I couldn't say that I'm exactly yearnin' for grub," he returned, "though I ain't done any eatin' since mornin'. I reckon a rattler's bite ain't considered to help a man's appetite any."

He heard her laugh softly. "No," she returned; "I wouldn't recommend it."

He tried again to see her, but could not, and so he relaxed and turned his gaze on the sky. But presently he felt her hand on his shoulder, and then her voice, as she spoke firmly.

"You can't lie here all night," she said. "You would be worse in the morning. And it is impossible for you to travel to-night. I am going to help you to get into the house. You can lean your weight on my shoulder."

He struggled to an erect position and made out her slender figure in the dim light from the window. He would have been

THE TWO-GUN MAN

afraid of crushing her could he have been induced to accept her advice. He got to his uninjured foot and began to hop toward the door, but she was beside him instantly protesting.

"Stop!" she commanded firmly. "If you do that it will be the worse for you. Put your hand on my shoulder!"

In the darkness he could see her eyes flash with determination, and so without further objection he placed a hand lightly on her shoulder, and in this manner they made their way through the door and into the cabin. Once inside the door he halted, blinking at the light and undecided. But she promptly led him toward another door, into a room containing a bed. She led him to the bedside and stood near him after he had sunk down upon it.

"You are to sleep here to-night," she said. "To-morrow, if you are considerably better, I may allow you to travel." She went out, returning immediately with a small bottle containing medicine. "If you feel worse during the night," she directed, "you must

A "DIFFERENT GIRL"

take a spoonful from that bottle. If you think you need anything else, don't hesitate to call. I shall be in the next room."

He started to voice his thanks, but she cut him short with a laugh. "Good-night," she said. Then she went out and closed the door after her.

He awoke several times during the night and each time took a taste of the medicine in the bottle. But shortly after midnight he fell into a heavy sleep, from which he did not awaken until the dawn had come. He lay quiet for a long time, until he heard steps in the kitchen, and then he rose and went to the door, throwing it open and standing on the threshold.

She was standing near the table, a coffee pot in her hand. Her eyes widened as she saw him.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You are very much better!"

He smiled. "I'm thankin' you for it, ma'am," he returned. "I cert'nly wouldn't have been feelin' anything if I hadn't met you when I did."

THE TWO-GUN MAN

She put the coffee pot down and looked gravely at him.

"You were in very bad shape when you came," she admitted. "There was a time when I thought my remedies would not pull you through. They would not had you come five minutes later."

He had no reply to make to this, and he stood there silent, until she poured coffee into a cup, arranged some dishes, and then invited him to sit at the table.

He needed no second invitation, for he had been twenty-four hours without food. And he had little excuse to complain of the quality of the food that was set before him. He ate in silence and when he had finished he turned away from the table to see the girl dragging a rocking chair out upon the porch. She returned immediately, smiling at him.

"Your chair is ready," she said. "I think you had better not exert yourself very much to-day."

"Why, ma'am," he expostulated, "I'm feelin' right well. I reckon I could be

A "DIFFERENT GIRL"

travelin' now. I ain't used to bein' babied this way."

"I don't think you are being 'babied,'" she returned a trifle coldly. "I don't think that I would waste any time with anyone if I thought it wasn't necessary. I am merely telling you to remain for your own good. Of course, if you wish to disregard my advice you may do so."

He smiled with a frank embarrassment and limped toward the door. "Why, ma'am," he said regretfully as he reached the door, "I cert'nly don't want to do anything which you think ain't right, after what you've done for me. I don't want to be-little you, an' I think that when I said that I might have been gassin' a little. But I thought mebbe I'd been enough trouble already."

It was not entirely the confession itself, but the self-accusing tone in which it had been uttered that brought a smile to her face.

"All the same," she said, "you are to do as I tell you."

THE TWO-GUN MAN

He smiled as he dropped into the chair on the porch. It was an odd experience for him. Never before in his life had anyone adopted toward him an air of even partial proprietorship. He had been accustomed to having people—always men—meet him upon a basis of equality, and if a man had adopted toward him the tone that she had employed there would have been an instant severing of diplomatic relations and a beginning of hostilities.

But this situation was odd—a woman had ordered him to do a certain thing and he was obeying, realizing that in doing so he was violating a principle, though conscious of a strange satisfaction. He knew that he had promised the Two Diamond manager, and he was convinced that, in spite of the pain in his foot, he was well enough to ride. But he was not going to ride; her command had settled that.

For a long time he sat in the chair, looking out over a great stretch of flat country which was rimmed on three sides by a fringe of low hills, and behind him by the cottonwood.

A "DIFFERENT GIRL"

The sun had been up long; it was swimming above the rim of distant hills—a ball of molten silver in a shimmering white blur. The cabin was set squarely in the center of a big clearing, and about an eighth of a mile behind him was a river—the river that he had been following when he had been bitten by the rattler.

He knew from the location of the cabin that he had not gone very far out of his way; that a ride of an eighth of a mile would bring him to the Two Diamond trail. And he could not be very far from the Two Diamond. Yet because of an order, issued by a girl, he was doomed to delay his appearance at the ranch.

He had seen no man about the cabin. Did the girl live here alone? He was convinced that no woman could long survive the solitude of this great waste of country—some man—a brother or a husband—must share the cabin with her. Several times he caught himself hoping that if there was a man here it might be a brother, or even a distant relative. The thought that she might have a

THE TWO-GUN MAN

husband aroused in him a sensation of vague disquiet.

He heard her moving about in the cabin, heard the rattle of dishes, the swish of a broom on the rough floor. And then presently she came out, dragging another rocker. Then she re-entered the cabin, returning with a strip of striped cloth and a sewing basket. She seated herself in the chair, placed the basket in her lap, and with a half smile on her face began to ply the needle. He lay back contentedly and watched her.

Hers was a lithe, vigorous figure in a white apron and a checkered dress of some soft material. She wore no collar; her sleeves were shoved up above the elbows, revealing a pair of slightly browned hands and white, rounded arms. Her eyes were brown as her hair—the latter in a tumble of graceful disorder. Through half closed eyes he was appraising her in a riot of admiration that threatened completely to bias his judgment. And yet women had interested him very little.

Perhaps that was because he had never

A "DIFFERENT GIRL"

seen a woman like this one. The women that he had known had been those of the plains-town—the unfortunates who through circumstances or inclination had been drawn into the maëlstrom of cow-country vice, and who, while they may have found flattery, were never objects of honest admiration or respect.

He had known this young woman only a few hours, and yet he knew that with her he could not adopt the easy, matter-of-fact intimacy that had answered with the other women he had known. In fact, the desire to look upon her in this light never entered his mind. Instead, he was filled with a deep admiration for her—an admiration in which there was a profound respect.

"I expect you must know your business, ma'am," he said, after watching her for a few minutes. "An' I'm mighty glad that you do. Most women would have been pretty nearly flustered over a snake bite."

"Why," she returned, without looking up, but exhibiting a little embarrassment, which betrayed itself in a slight flush, "I really

THE TWO-GUN MAN

think that I was a little excited—especially when you came riding up to the porch.” She thought of his words, when, looking at her accusingly, he had told her that she was “a hell of a snake,” and the flush grew, suffusing her face. This of course he had not known and never would know, but the words had caused her many smiles during the night.

“You didn’t show it much,” he observed. “You must have took right a-hold. Some women would have gone clean off the handle. They wouldn’t have been able to do anything.”

Her lips twitched, but she still gave her attention to her sewing, treating his talk with a mild interest.

“There is nothing about a snake bite to become excited over. That is, if treatment is applied in time. In your case the tourniquet kept the poison from getting very far into your system. If you hadn’t thought of that it might have gone very hard with you.”

“That rope around my leg wouldn’t have done me a bit of good though, ma’am, if I

A "DIFFERENT GIRL"

hadn't stumbled onto your cabin. I don't know when seein' a woman has pleased me more."

She smiled enigmatically, her eyelashes flickering slightly. But she did not answer.

Until noon she sewed, and he lay lazily back in the chair, watching her sometimes, sometimes looking at the country around him. They talked very little. Once, when he had been looking at her for a long time, she suddenly raised her eyes and they met his fairly. Both smiled, but he saw a blush mantle her cheeks.

At noon she rose and entered the cabin. A little later she called to him, telling him that dinner was ready. He washed from the tin basin that stood on the bench just outside the door, and entering sat at the table and ate heartily.

After dinner he did not see her again for a time, and becoming wearied of the chair he set out on a short excursion to the river. When he returned she was seated on the porch and looked up at him with a demure smile.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"You will be quite active by to-morrow," she said.

"I ain't feelin' exactly lazy now," he returned, showing a surprising agility in reaching his chair.

When the sun began to swim low over the hills, he looked at her with a curiously grim smile.

"I reckon that rattler was fooled last night," he said. "But if foolin' him had been left to me I expect I'd have made a bad job of it. But I'm thinkin' that he done his little old dyin' when the sun went down last night. An' I'm still here. An' I'll keep right on, usin' his brothers an' sisters for targets—when I think that I'm needin' practice."

"Then you killed the snake?"

"Why sure, ma'am. I wasn't figgerin' to let that rattler go a-fannin' right on to hook someone else. That'd be encouragin' his trade."

She laughed, evidently pleased over his earnestness. "Oh, I see," she said. "Then you were not angry merely because he bit

A "DIFFERENT GIRL"

you? You killed him to keep him from attacking other persons?"

He smiled. "I sure was some angry," he returned. "An' I reckon that just at the time I wasn't thinkin' much about other people. I was havin' plenty to keep me busy."

"But you killed him. How?"

"Why I shot him, ma'am. Was you thinkin' that I beat him to death with some-thin'?"

Her lips twitched again, the corners turning suggestively inward. But now he caught her looking at his guns. She looked from them to his face. "All cowboys do not carry two guns," she said suddenly.

He looked gravely at her. "Well, no, ma'am, they don't. There's some that claim carryin' two guns is clumsy. But there's been times when I found them right convenient."

She fell silent now, regarding her sewing. A quizzical smile had reached his face. This exchange of talk had developed the fact that she was a stranger to the country. No

THE TWO-GUN MAN

Western girl would have made her remark about the guns.

He did not know whether or not he was pleased over the discovery. Certain subtle signs about her had warned him in the beginning that she was different from the other women of his acquaintance, but he had not thought of her being a stranger here, of her coming here from some other section of the country—the East, for instance.

Her being from the East would account for many things. First, it would make plain to him why she had smiled several times during their talks, over things in which he had been able to see no humor. Then it would answer the question that had formed in his mind concerning the fluency of her speech. Western girls that he had met had not attained that ease and poise which he saw was hers so naturally. Yet in spite of this accomplishment she was none the less a woman—demure eyed, ready to blush and become confused as easily as a Western woman. Assured of this, he dropped the slight constraint which up till now had been plain in

A "DIFFERENT GIRL"

his voice, and an inward humor seemed to draw the corners of his mouth slightly downward.

"I reckon that folks where you come from don't wear guns at all, ma'am," he said slowly.

She looked up quickly, surprised into meeting his gaze fairly. His eyes did not waver. She rocked vigorously, showing some embarrassment and giving undue attention to her sewing.

"How do you know that?" she questioned, raising her head and looking at him with suddenly defiant eyes. "I am not aware that I told you that I was a stranger here! Don't you think you are guessing now?"

His eyes narrowed cunningly. "I don't think I need to do any guessin', ma'am," he returned. "When a man sees a different girl, he don't have to guess none."

The "different" girl was regarding him with furtive glances, plainly embarrassed under his direct words. But there was much defiance in her eyes, as though she was aware

THE TWO-GUN MAN

of the trend of his words and was determined to outwit him.

"I think you must be a remarkable man," she said, with the faintest trace of mockery in her voice, "to be able to discover such a thing so quickly. Or perhaps it is the atmosphere—it is marvelous."

"I expect it ain't exactly marvelous," he returned, laboring with the last word. "When a girl acts different, a man is pretty apt to know it." He leaned forward a little, speaking earnestly. "I know that I'm talkin' pretty plain to you, ma'am," he went on. "But when a man has been bit by a rattler an' has sort of give up hope an' has had his life saved by a girl, he's to be excused if he feels that he's some acquainted with the girl. An' then when he finds that she's some different from the girls he's been used to seein', I don't see why he hadn't ought to take a lot of interest in her."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, her eyes drooping. And then, her eyes dancing as they shot a swift glance at him—"I should call that a pretty speech."

A "DIFFERENT GIRL"

He reddened with embarrassment. "I expect you are laughin' at me now, ma'am," he said. "But I wasn't thinkin' to make any pretty speeches. I was tellin' you the truth."

She soberly plied her needle, and he sat back, watching her.

"I expect you are a stranger around here yourself," she said presently, her eyes covered with drooping lashes. "How do you know that you have any right to sit there and tell me that you take an interest in me? How do you know that I am not married?"

He was not disconcerted. He drawled slightly over his words when he answered.

"You wouldn't listen at me at all, ma'am; you cert'nly wouldn't stay an' listen to any speeches that you thought was pretty, if you was married," he said. Plainly, he had not lost faith in the virtue of woman.

"But if I did listen?" she questioned, her face crimson, though her eyes were still defiant.

He regarded her with pleased eyes. "I've been lookin' for a weddin' ring," he said.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

She gave it up in confusion. "I don't know why I am talking this way to you," she said. "I expect it is because there isn't anything else to do. But you really are entertaining!" she declared, for a parting shot.

Once Ferguson had seen a band of traveling minstrels in Cimarron. Their jokes (of an ancient vintage) had taken well with the audience, for the latter had laughed. Ferguson remembered that a stranger had said that the minstrels were "entertaining." And now he was entertaining her. A shadow passed over his face; he looked down at his foot, with its white bandage so much in evidence. Then straight at her, his eyes grave and steady.

"I'm glad to have amused you, ma'am," he said. "An' now I reckon I'll be gettin' over to the Two Diamond. It can't be very far now."

"Five miles," she said shortly. She had dropped her sewing into her lap and sat motionless, regarding him with level eyes.

"Are you working for the Two Diamond?" she questioned.

A "DIFFERENT GIRL"

"Lookin' for a job," he returned.

"Oh!" The exclamation struck him as rather expressionless. He looked at her.

"Do you know the Two Diamond folks?"

"Of course."

"Of course," he repeated, aware of the constraint in her voice. "I ought to have known. They're neighbors of your'n."

"They are not!" she suddenly flashed back at him.

"Well, now," he returned slowly, puzzled, but knowing that somehow he was getting things wrong, "I reckon there's a lot that I don't know."

"If you are going to work over at the Two Diamond," she said coldly, "you will know more than you do now. My——"

Evidently she was about to say something more, but a sound caught her ear and she rose, dropping her sewing to the chair.

"My brother is coming," she said quietly.

Standing near the door she caught Ferguson's swift glance.

"Then it ain't a husband after all," he said, pretending surprise.

CHAPTER V

THE MAN OF DRY BOTTOM

A YOUNG man rode around the corner of the cabin and halted his pony beside the porch, sitting quietly in the saddle and gazing inquiringly at the two. He was about Ferguson's age and, like the latter, he wore two heavy guns. There was about him, as he sat there sweeping a slow glance over the girl and the man, a certain atmosphere of deliberate certainty and quiet coldness that gave an impression of readiness for whatever might occur.

Ferguson's eyes lighted with satisfaction. The girl might be an Easterner, but the young man was plainly at home in this country. Nowhere, except in the West, could he have acquired the serene calm that

THE MAN OF DRY BOTTOM

shone out of his eyes; in no other part of the world could he have caught the easy assurance, the unstudied nonchalance, that seems the inherent birthright of the cow-puncher.

"Ben," said the girl, answering the young man's glance, "this man was bitten by a rattler. He came here, and I treated him. He says he was on his way over to the Two Diamond, for a job."

The young man opened his lips slightly. "Stafford hire you?" he asked.

"I'm hopin' he does," returned Ferguson.

The young man's lips drooped sneeringly. "I reckon you're wantin' a job mighty bad," he said.

Ferguson smiled. "Takin' your talk, you an' Stafford ain't very good friends," he returned.

The young man did not answer. He dismounted and led his pony to a small corral and then returned to the porch, carrying his saddle.

For an instant after the young man had left the porch to turn his pony into the cor-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

ral Ferguson had kept his seat on the porch. But something in the young man's tone had brought him out of the chair, determined to accept no more of his hospitality. If the young man was no friend of Stafford, it followed that he could not feel well disposed to a puncher who had avowed that his purpose was to work for the Two Diamond manager.

Ferguson was on his feet, clinging to one of the slender porch posts, preparatory to stepping down to go to his pony, when the young woman came out. Her sharp exclamation halted him.

"You're not going now!" she said. "You have got to remain perfectly quiet until morning!"

The brother dropped his saddle to the porch floor, grinning mildly at Ferguson, "You don't need to be in a hurry," he said. "I was intending to run your horse into the corral. What I meant about Stafford don't apply to you." He looked up at his sister, still grinning. "I reckon he ain't got nothing to do with it?"

THE MAN OF DRY BOTTOM

The young woman blushed. "I hope not," she said in a low voice.

"We're goin' to eat pretty soon," said the young man. "I reckon that rattler didn't take your appetite?"

Ferguson flushed. "It was plum ridiculous, me bein' hooked by a rattler," he said. "An' I've lived among them so long."

"I reckon you let him get away?" questioned the young man evenly.

"If he's got away," returned Ferguson, his lips straightening with satisfaction, "he's a right smart snake."

He related the incident of the attack, ending with praises of the young woman's skill.

The young man smiled at the reference to his sister. "She's studied medicine—back East. Lately she's turned her hand to writin'. Come out here to get experience—local color, she calls it."

Ferguson sat back in his chair, quietly digesting this bit of information. Medicine and writing. What did she write? Love stories? Fairy tales? Romances? He had read several of these. Mostly they were ab-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

surd and impossible. Love stories, he thought, would be easy for her. For—he said, mentally estimating her—a woman ought to know more about love than a man. And as for anything being impossible in a love story. Why most anything could happen to people who are in love.

“Supper is ready,” he heard her announce from within.

Ferguson preceded the young man at the tin wash basin, taking a fresh towel that the young woman offered him from the doorway. Then he followed the young man inside. The three took places at the table, and Ferguson was helped to a frugal, though wholesome meal.

The dusk had begun to fall while they were yet at the table, and the young woman arose, lighting a kerosene lamp and placing it on the table. By the time they had finished semi-darkness had settled. Ferguson followed the young man out to the chairs on the porch for a smoke.

They were scarcely seated when there was a clatter of hoofs, and a pony and rider came

THE MAN OF DRY BOTTOM

out of the shadow of the nearby cottonwood, approaching the cabin and halting beside the porch. The newcomer was a man of about thirty-five. The light of the kerosene lamp shone fairly in his face as he sat in the saddle, showing a pair of cold, steady eyes and thin, straight lips that were wreathed in a smile.

"I thought I'd ride over for a smoke an' a talk before goin' down the crick to where the outfit's workin'," he said to the young man. And now his eyes swept Ferguson's lank figure with a searching glance. "But I didn't know you was havin' company," he added. The second glance that he threw toward Ferguson was not friendly.

Ferguson's lips curled slightly under it. Each man had been measured by the other, and neither had found in the other anything to admire.

Ferguson's thoughts went rapidly back to Dry Bottom. He saw a man in the street, putting five bullets through a can that he had thrown into the air. He saw again the man's face as he had completed his exhi-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

bition—insolent, filled with a sneering triumph. He heard again this man's voice, as he himself had offered to eclipse his feat:—

“You runnin’ sheep, stranger?”

The voice and face of the man who stood before him now were the voice and face of the man who had preceded him in the shooting match in Dry Bottom. His thoughts were interrupted by the voice of his host, explaining his presence.

“This here man was bit by a rattler this afternoon,” the young man was saying. “He’s layin’ up here for to-night. Says he’s reckonin’ on gettin’ a job over at the Two Diamond.”

The man on the horse sneered. “Hell!” he said; “bit by a rattler!” He laughed insolently, pulling his pony’s head around. “I reckon I’ll be goin’,” he said. “Y’ou’ll nurse him so’s he won’t die?” He had struck the pony’s flanks with the spurs and was gone into the shadows before either man on the porch could move. There was a short silence, while the two men listened to the beat

THE MAN OF DRY BOTTOM

of his pony's hoofs. Then Ferguson turned and spoke to the young man.

"You know him?" he questioned.

The young man smiled coldly. "Yep," he said; "he's range boss for the Two Diamond!"

CHAPTER VI

AT THE TWO DIAMOND

AS Ferguson rode through the pure sunshine of the morning his thoughts kept going back to the little cabin in the flat—"Bear Flat," she had called it. Certain things troubled him—he, whose mind had been always untroubled—even through three months of idleness that had not been exactly attractive.

"She's cert'nly got nice eyes," he told himself confidentially, as he lingered slowly on his way; "an' she knows how to use them. She sure made me seem some breathless. An' no girl has ever done that. An' her hair is like"—he pondered long over this—"like—why, I reckon I didn't just ever see anything like it. An' the way she looked at me!"

AT THE TWO DIAMOND

A shadow crossed his face. "So she's a writer—an' she's studied medicine. I reckon I'd like it a heap better if she didn't monkey with none of them fool things. What business has a girl got to——" He suddenly laughed aloud. "Why I reckon I'm pretty near loco," he said, "to be ravin' about a girl like this. She ain't nothin' to me; she just done what any other girl would do if a man come to her place bit by a rattler."

He spurred his pony forward at a sharp lope. And now he found that his thoughts would go back to the moment of his departure from the cabin that morning. She had accompanied him to the door, after bandaging the ankle. Her brother had gone away an hour before.

"I'm thankin' you, ma'am," Ferguson said as he stood for a moment at the door. "I reckon I'd have had a bad time if it hadn't been for you."

"It was nothing," she returned.

He had hesitated—he still felt the thrill of doubt that had assailed him before he had taken the step that he knew was impertinent.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"I'll be ridin' over here again, some day, if you don't mind," he said.

Her face reddened a trifle. "I'm sure brother would like to have you," she replied.

"I don't remember to have said that I was comin' over to see your brother," was his reply.

"But it would have to be he," she said, looking straight at him. "You couldn't come to see me unless I asked you."

And now he had spoken a certain word that had been troubling him. "Do you reckon that Two Diamond range boss comes over to see your brother?"

She frowned. "Of course!" she replied. "He is my brother's friend. But I—I despise him!"

Ferguson grinned broadly. "Well, now," he said, unable to keep his pleasure over her evident dislike of the Two Diamond man from showing in his eyes and voice, "that's cert'nly too bad. An' to think he's wastin' his time—ridin' over here."

She gazed at him with steady, unwavering eyes. He could still remember the chal-

AT THE TWO DIAMOND

lenge in them. "Be careful that you don't waste your time!" was her answer.

"I reckon I won't," was his reply, as he climbed into the saddle. "But I won't be comin' over here to see your brother!"

"Oh, dear!" she said, "I call that very brazen!"

But when he had spurred his pony down through the crossing of the river he had turned to glance back at her. And he had seen a smile on her face. As he rode now he went over this conversation many times, much pleased with his own boldness; more pleased because she had not seemed angry with him.

It was late in the morning when he caught sight of the Two Diamond ranch buildings, scattered over a great basin through which the river flowed. Half an hour later he rode up to the ranchhouse and met Stafford at the door of the office. The manager waved him inside.

"I'm two days late," said Ferguson, after he had taken a chair in the office. He related to Stafford the attack by the rattler.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

The latter showed some concern over the injury.

"I reckon you didn't do your own doctor-in'?" he asked.

Ferguson told him of the girl. The manager's lips straightened. A grim humor shone from his eyes.

"You stayed there over night?" he questioned.

"I reckon I stayed there. It was in a cabin down at a place which I heard the girl say was called 'Bear Flat.' I didn't ketch the name of the man."

Stafford grinned coldly. "I reckon they didn't know what you was comin' over here for?"

"I didn't advertise," returned Ferguson quietly.

"If you had," declared Stafford, his eyes glinting with a cold amusement, "you would have found things plum lively. The man's name is Ben Radford. He's the man I'm hirin' you to put out of business!"

For all Stafford could see Ferguson did not move a muscle. Yet the news had

AT THE TWO DIAMOND

shocked him; he could feel the blood surging rapidly through his veins. But the expression of his face was inscrutable.

"Well, now," he said, "that sure would have made things interestin'. An' so that's the man you think has been stealin' your cattle?" He looked steadily at the manager. "But I told you before that I wasn't doin' any shootin'."

"Correct," agreed the manager. "What I want you to do is to prove that Radford's the man. We can't do anything until we prove that he's been rustlin'. An' then——" He smiled grimly.

"You reckon to know the girl's name too?" inquired Ferguson.

"It's Mary," stated the manager. "I've heard Leviatt talk about her."

Ferguson contemplated the manager gravely. "An' you ain't sure that Radford's stealin' your cattle?"

Stafford filled and lighted his pipe. "I'm takin' Dave Leviatt's word for it," he said.

"Who's Leviatt?" queried Ferguson.

"My range boss," returned Stafford.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"He's been ridin' sign on Radford an' says he's responsible for all the stock that we've been missin' in the last six months."

Ferguson rolled a cigarette. He lighted it and puffed for a moment in silence, the manager watching him.

"Back at Dry Bottom," said Ferguson presently, "there was a man shootin' at a can when I struck town. He put five bullets through the can. Was that your range boss?"

Stafford smiled. "That was Leviatt—my range boss," he returned. "We went over to Dry Bottom to get a gunfighter. We wanted a man who could shoot plum quick. He'd have to be quick, for Radford's lightnin' with a six. Leviatt said shootin' at a can would be a good way to find a man who could take Radford's measure—in case it was necessary," he added quickly.

Ferguson's face was a mask of immobility. "Where's Leviatt now?" he questioned.

"Up the Ute with the outfit."

"How far up?"

"Thirty miles."

AT THE TWO DIAMOND

Ferguson's eyelashes flickered. "Has Leviatt been here lately?" he questioned.

"Not since the day before yesterday."

"When you expectin' him back?"

"The boys'll be comin' back in a week. He'll likely come along with them."

"U—um. You're giving me a free hand?"

"Of course."

Ferguson lounged to the door. "I'm lookin' around a little," he said, "to kind of size up things. I don't want you to put me with the outfit. That strike you right?"

"I'm hirin' you to do a certain thing," returned Stafford. "I ain't tellin' you how it ought to be done. You've got till the fall roundup to do it."

Ferguson nodded. He went to the corral fence, unhitched his pony, and rode out on the plains toward the river. Stafford watched him until he was a mere dot on the horizon. Then he smiled with satisfaction.

"I kind of like that guy," he said, commenting mentally. "There ain't no show work to him, but he's business."

CHAPTER VII

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

DURING the week following Ferguson's arrival at the Two Diamond ranch Stafford saw very little of him. Mornings saw him proceed to the corral, catch up his pony, mount, and depart. He returned with the dusk. Several times, from his office window, Stafford had seen him ride away in the moonlight.

Ferguson did his own cooking, for the cook had accompanied the wagon outfit down the river. Stafford did not seek out the new man with instructions or advice; the work Ferguson was engaged in he must do alone, for if complications should happen to arise it was the manager's business to know nothing.

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

The Two Diamond ranch was not unlike many others that dotted the grass plains of the Territory. The interminable miles that separated Stafford from the nearest, did not prevent him from referring to that particular owner as "neighbor", for distances were thus determined—and distances thus determined were nearly always inaccurate. The traveler inquiring for his destination was expected to discover it somewhere in the unknown distance.

The Two Diamond ranch had the enviable reputation of being "slick"—which meant that Stafford was industrious and thrifty and that his ranch bore an appearance of unusual neatness. For example, Stafford believed in the science of irrigation. A fence skirted his buildings, another ran around a large area of good grass, forming a pasture for his horses. His buildings were attractive, even though rough, for they revealed evidence of continued care. His ranchhouse boasted a sloped roof and paved galleries.

A garden in the rear was but another in-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

stance of Stafford's industry. He had cattle that were given extraordinary care because they were "milkers," for in his youth Stafford had lived on a farm and he remembered days when his father had sent him out into the meadow to drive the cows home for the milking. There were many other things that Stafford had not forgotten, for chickens scratched promiscuously about the ranch yard, occasionally trespassing into the sacred precincts of the garden and the flower beds. His horses were properly stabled during the cold, raw days that came inevitably; his men had little to complain of, and there was a general atmosphere of prosperity over the entire ranch.

But of late there had been little contentment for the Two Diamond manager. For six months cattle thieves had been at work on his stock. The result of the spring round-up had been far from satisfactory. He knew of the existence of nesters in the vicinity; one of them—Radford—he had suspected upon evidence submitted by the range boss. Radford had been warned to va-

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

cate Bear Flat, but the warning had been disregarded.

But one other course was left, and Stafford had adopted that. There had been no hesitancy on the manager's part; he must protect the Two Diamond property. Sentiment had no place in the situation whatever. Therefore toward Ferguson's movements Stafford adopted an air of studied indifference, not doubting, from what he had seen of the man, that he would eventually ride in and report that the work which he had been hired to do was finished.

Toward the latter end of the week the wagon outfit straggled in. They came in singly, in twos and threes, bronzed, hardy, seasoned young men, taciturn, serene eyed, capable. They continued to come until there were twenty-seven of them. Later in the day came the wagon and the remuda.

From a period of calm and inaction the ranch now awoke to life and movement. The bunkhouse was scrubbed;—"swabbed" in the vernacular of the cowboys; the scant bedding was "cured" in the white sunlight;

THE TWO-GUN MAN

and the cook was adjured to extend himself in the preparation of "chuck" (meaning food) to repay the men for the lack of good things during a fortnight on the open range with the wagon.

At dusk on the first day in Rope Jones, a tall, lithe young puncher, whose spare moments were passed in breaking the wild horses that occasionally found their way to the Two Diamond, was oiling his saddle leathers. Sitting on a bench outside the bunkhouse he became aware of Stafford standing near.

"Leviatt come in?" queried the manager.

The puncher grinned. "Nope. Last I seen of Dave he was hittin' the breeze toward Bear Flat. Said he'd be in later." He lowered his voice significantly. "Reckon that Radford girl is botherin' Dave a heap."

Stafford smiled coldly and was about to answer when he saw Ferguson dropping from his pony at the corral gate. Following Stafford's gaze, Rope also observed Ferguson. He looked up at Stafford.

"New man?" he questioned.

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

Stafford nodded. He had invented a plausible story for the presence of Ferguson. Sooner or later the boys would have noticed the latter's absence from the outfit. Therefore if he advanced his story now there would be less conjecture later.

"You boys have got enough to do," he said, still watching Ferguson. "I've hired this man to look up strays. I reckon he c'n put in a heap of time at it."

Rope shot a swift glance upward at the manager's back. Then he grinned furtively.

"Two-gun," he observed quietly; "with the bottoms of his holsters tied down. I reckon your stray-man ain't for to be monkeyed with."

But Stafford had told his story and knew that within a very little time Rope would be telling it to the other men. So without answering he walked toward the ranchhouse. Before he reached it he saw Leviatt unsaddling at the corral gate.

When Ferguson, with his saddle on his shoulder, on his way to place it on its accustomed peg in the lean-to adjoining the bunk-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

house, passed Rope, it was by the merest accident that one of the stirrups caught the cinch buckle of Rope's saddle. Not observing the tangle, Ferguson continued on his way. He halted when he felt the stirrup strap drag, turning half around to see what was wrong. He smiled broadly at Rope.

"You reckon them saddles are acquainted?" he said.

Rope deftly untangled them. "I ain't thinkin' they're relations," he returned, grinning up at Ferguson. "Leastways I never knowed a 'double cinch' an' a 'center fire' to git real chummy."

"I reckon you're right," returned Ferguson, his eyes gleaming cordially; "an' I've knowed men to lose their tempers discussin' whether a center fire or a double cinch was the most satisfyin'."

"Some men is plum fools," returned Rope, surveying Ferguson with narrow, pleased eyes. "You didn't observe that the saddles rode any easier after the argument than before?"

"I didn't observe. But mebbe the men

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

was more satisfied. Let a man argue that somethin' he's got is better'n somethin' that another fellow's got an' he falls right in love with his own—an' goes right on fallin' in love with it. Nothin' c'n ever change his mind after an argument."

"I know a man who's been studyin' human nature," observed Rope, grinning.

"An' not wastin' his time arguin' fool questions," added Ferguson.

"You sure ain't plum greenhorn," declared Rope admiringly.

"Thank yu'," smiled Ferguson; "I wasn't lookin' to see whether you'd cut your eye-teeth either."

"Well, now," remarked Rope, rising and shouldering his saddle, "you've almost convinced me that a double cinch ain't a bad saddle. Seems to make a man plum good humored."

"When a man's hungry an' right close to the place where he's goin' to feed," said Ferguson gravely, "he hadn't ought to bother his head about nothin'."

"You're settin' at my right hand at the

THE TWO-GUN MAN

table," remarked Rope, delighted with his new friend.

Several of the men were already at the washtub when Rope and Ferguson reached there. The method by which they performed their ablutions was not delicate, but it was thorough. And when the dust had been removed their faces shone with the dusky health-bloom that told of their hard, healthy method of living. Men of various ages were there—grizzled riders who saw the world through the introspective eye of experience; young men with their enthusiasms, their impulses; middle-aged men who had seen much of life—enough to be able to face the future with unshaken complacency; but all bronzed, clear-eyed, self-reliant, unafraid.

When Ferguson and Rope entered the bunkhouse many of the men were already seated. Ferguson and Rope took places at one end of the long table and began eating. No niceties of the conventions were observed here; the men ate each according to his whim and were immune from criticism.

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

Table etiquette was a thing that would have spoiled their joy of eating. Theirs was a primitive country; their occupation primitive; their manner of living no less so. They concerned themselves very little with the customs of a world of which they heard very little.

Nor did they bolt their food silently—as has been recorded of them by men who knew them little. If they did eat rapidly it was because the ravening hunger of a healthy stomach demanded instant attention. And they did not overeat. Epicurus would have marveled at the simplicity of their food. Conversation was mingled with every mouthful.

At one end of the table sat an empty plate, with no man on the bench before it. This was the place reserved for Leviatt, the range boss. Next to this place on the right was seated a goodlooking young puncher, whose age might have been estimated at twenty-three. "Skinny" they called him because of his exceeding slenderness. At the moment Ferguson settled into his seat the

THE TWO-GUN MAN

young man was filling the room with rapid talk. This talk had been inconsequential and concerned only those small details about which we bother during our leisure. But now his talk veered and he was suddenly telling something that gave promise of consecutiveness and universal interest. Other voices died away as his arose.

"Leviatt ain't the only one," he was saying. "She ain't made no exception with any of the outfit. To my knowin' there's been Lon Dexter, Soapy, Clem Miller, Lazy, Wrinkles—an' myself," he admitted, reddening, "been notified that we was mavericks an' needed our ears marked. An' now comes Leviatt a-fannin' right on to get his'n. An' I reckon he'll get it."

"You ain't tellin' what she said when she give you your'n," said a voice.

There was a laugh, through which the youth emerged smiling broadly.

"No," he said, "I ain't tellin'. But she told Soapy here that she was lookin' for local color. Wanted to know if he was it. Since then Soapy's been using a right smart

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

lot of soap, tryin' to rub some color into his face."

Color was in Soapy's face now. He sat directly opposite the slender youth and his cheeks were crimson.

"I reckon if you'd keep to the truth——" he began. But Skinny has passed on to the next.

"An' there's Dexter. Lon's been awful quiet since she told him he had a picturesque name. Said it'd do for to put into a book which she's goin' to write, but when it come to choosin' a husband she'd prefer to tie up to a commoner name. An' so Lon didn't graze on that range no more."

"This country's goin' plum to——" sneered Dexter. But a laugh silenced him. And the youth continued.

"It might have been fixed up for Lazy," he went on, "only when she found out his name was Lazy, she wanted to know right off if he could support a wife—providin' he got one. He said he reckoned he could, an' she told him he could experiment on some other woman. An' now Lazy'll have to look

THE TWO-GUN MAN

around quite a spell before he'll get another chanest. I'd call that bein' in mighty poor luck."

Lazy was giving his undivided attention to his plate.

"An' she come right out an' told Wrinkles he was too old; that when she was thinkin' of gettin' wedded to some old monolith she'd send word to Egypt, where they keep 'em in stock. Beats me where she gets all them words."

"Told me she'd studied her dictionary," said a man who sat near Ferguson.

The young man grinned. "Well, I swear if I didn't come near forgettin' Clem Miller!" he said. "If you hadn't spoke up then, I reckon you wouldn't have been in on this deal. An' so she told you she'd studied her dictionary! Now, I'd call that news. Some one'd been tellin' me that she'd asked you the meanin' of the word 'evaporate.' An' when you couldn't tell her she told you to do it. Said that when you got home you might look up a dictionary an' then you'd know what she meant.

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

"An' now Leviatt's hangin' around over there," continued the youth. "He's claimin' to be goin' to see Ben Radford, but I reckon he's got the same kind of sickness as the rest of us."

"An' you ain't sayin' a word about what she said to you," observed Miller. "She must have treated you awful gentle, seein' you won't tell."

"Well," returned the young man, "I ain't layin' it all out to you. But I'll tell you this much; she said she was goin' to make me one of the characters in that book she's writin'."

"Well, now," said Miller, "that's sure lettin' you down easy. Did she say what the character was goin' to be?"

"I reckon she did."

"An' now you're goin' to tell us boys?"

"An' now I'm goin' to tell you boys," returned Skinny. "But I reckon there's a drove of them characters here. You'll find them with every outfit, an' you'll know them chiefly by their bray an' their long, hairy ears."

The young man now smiled into his plate,

THE TWO-GUN MAN

while a chorus of laughter rose around him. In making himself appear as ridiculous a figure as the others, the young man had successfully extracted all the sting from his story and gained the applause of even those at whom he had struck.

But now a sound was heard outside, and Leviatt came into the room. He nodded shortly and took his place at the end of the table. A certain reserve came into the atmosphere of the room. No further reference was made to the subject that had aroused laughter, but several of the men snickered into their plates over the recollection of Leviatt's connection with the incident.

As the meal continued Leviatt's gaze wandered over the table, resting finally upon Ferguson. The range boss's face darkened.

Ferguson had seen Leviatt enter; several times during the course of the meal he felt Leviatt looking at him. Once, toward the end, his glance met the range boss's fairly. Leviatt's eyes glittered evilly; Ferguson's lips curled with a slight contempt.

And yet these men had met but twice be-

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

fore. A man meets another in North America—in the Antipodes. He looks upon him, meets his eye, and instantly has won a friend or made an enemy. Perhaps this will always be true of men. Certainly it was true of Ferguson and the range boss.

What force was at work in Leviatt when in Dry Bottom he had insulted Ferguson? Whatever the force, it had told him that the steady-eyed, deliberate gun-man was henceforth to be an enemy. Enmity, hatred, evil intent, shone out of his eyes as they met Ferguson's.

Beyond the slight curl of the lips the latter gave no indication of feeling. And after the exchange of glances he resumed eating, apparently unaware of Leviatt's existence.

Later, the men straggled from the bunk-house, seeking the outdoors to smoke and talk. Upon the bench just outside the door several of the men sat; others stood at a little distance, or lounged in the doorway. With Rope, Ferguson had come out and was standing near the door, talking.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

The talk was light, turning to trivial incidents of the day's work—things that are the monotony of the cowboy life.

Presently Leviatt came out and joined the group. He stood near Ferguson, mingling his voice with the others. For a little time the talk flowed easily and much laughter rose. Then suddenly above the good natured babble came a harsh word. Instantly the other voices ceased, and the men of the group centered their glances upon the range boss, for the harsh word had come from him. He had been talking to a man named Tucson and it was to the latter that he had now spoken.

"There's a heap of rattlers in this country," he had said.

Evidently the statement was irrelevant, for Tucson's glance at Leviatt's face was uncomprehending. But Leviatt did not wait for an answer.

"A man might easily claim to have been bit by one of them," he continued, his voice falling coldly.

The men of the group sat in a tense

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

silence, trying to penetrate this mystery that had suddenly silenced their talk. Steady eyes searched out each face in an endeavor to discover the man at whom the range boss was talking. They did not discover him. Ferguson stood near Leviatt, an arm's length distant, his hands on his hips. Perhaps his eyes were more alert than those of the other men, his lips in a straighter line. But apparently he knew no more of this mystery than any of the others.

And now Leviatt's voice rose again, insolent, carrying an unmistakable personal application.

"Stafford hires a stray-man," he said, sneering. "This man claims to have been bit by a rattler an' lays up over night in Ben Radford's cabin—makin' love to Mary Radford."

Ferguson turned his head slightly, surveying the range boss with a cold, alert eye.

"A little while ago," he said evenly, "I heard a man inside tellin' about some of the boys learnin' their lessons from a girl over on Bear Flat. I reckon, Leviatt, that you've

THE TWO-GUN MAN

been over there to learn your'n. An' now you've got to let these boys know——!"

Just a rustle it was—a snake-like motion. And then Ferguson's gun was out; its cold muzzle pressed deep into the pit of Leviatt's stomach, and Ferguson's left hand was pinning Leviatt's right to his side, the range boss's hand still wrapped around the butt of his half-drawn weapon. Then came Ferguson's voice again, dry, filled with a quiet earnestness:

"I ain't goin' to hurt you—you're still tenderfoot with a gun. I just wanted to show these boys that you're a false alarm, I reckon they know that now."

Leviatt sneered. There was a movement behind Ferguson. Tucson's gun was half way out of its holster. And then arose Rope's voice as his weapon came out and menaced Tucson.

"Three in this game would make it odd, Tucson," he said quietly. "If there's goin' to be any shootin', let's have an even break, anyway."

Tucson's hand fell away from his holster;

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

he stepped back toward the door, away from the range boss and Ferguson.

Leviatt's face had crimsoned. "Mebbe I was runnin' a little bit wild——" he began.

"That's comin' down right handsome," said Ferguson.

He sheathed his gun and deliberately turned his back on Leviatt. The latter stood silent for a moment, his face gradually paling. Then he turned to where Tucson had taken himself and with his friend entered the bunkhouse. In an instant the old talk arose and the laughter, but many furtive glances swept Ferguson as he stood, talking quietly with Rope.

The following morning Stafford came upon Rope while the latter was throwing the saddle on his pony down at the corral gate.

"I heard something about some trouble between Dave Leviatt an' the new stray-man," said Stafford. "I reckon it wasn't serious?"

Rope turned a grave eye upon the manager. "Shucks," he returned, "I reckon it wasn't nothin' serious. Only," he continued

THE TWO-GUN MAN

with twitching lips, "Dave was takin' the stray-man's measure."

Stafford smiled grimly. "How did the stray-man measure up?" he inquired, a smile working at the corners of his mouth. "I reckon he wasn't none shy?"

Rope grinned, admiration glinting his eyes. "He's sure man's size," he returned, giving his attention to the saddle cinch.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FINDING OF THE ORPHAN

DURING the few first days of his connection with the Two Diamond Ferguson had reached the conclusion that he would do well to take plenty of time to inquire into the situation before attempting any move. He had now been at the Two Diamond for two weeks and he had not even seen Radford. Nor had he spoken half a dozen words with Stafford. The manager had observed certain signs that had convinced him that speech with the stray-man was unnecessary and futile. If he purposed to do anything he would do it in his own time and in his own way. Stafford mentally decided that the stray-man was "set in his ways."

THE TWO-GUN MAN

The wagon outfit had departed,—this time down the river. Rope Jones had gone with the wagon, and therefore Ferguson was deprived of the companionship of a man who had unexpectedly taken a stand with him in his clash with Leviatt and for whom he had conceived a great liking.

With the wagon had gone Leviatt also. During the week that had elapsed between the clash at the bunkhouse and the departure of the wagon the range boss had given no sign that he knew of the existence of Ferguson. Nor had he intimated by word or sign that he meditated revenge upon Rope because of the latter's championship of the stray-man. If he had any such intention he concealed it with consummate skill. He treated Rope with a politeness that drew smiles to the faces of the men. But Ferguson saw in this politeness a subtleness of purpose that gave him additional light on the range boss's character. A man who held his vengeance at his finger tips would have taken pains to show Rope that he might expect no mercy. Had Leviatt revealed an

THE FINDING OF THE ORPHAN

open antagonism to Rope, the latter might have known what to expect when at last the two men would reach the open range and the puncher be under the direct domination of the man he had offended.

There were many ways in which a petty vengeance might be gratified. It was within the range boss's power to make life nearly unbearable for the puncher. If he did this it would of course be an unworthy vengeance, and Ferguson had little doubt that any vengeance meditated by Leviatt would not be petty.

Ferguson went his own way, deeply thoughtful. He was taking his time. Certain things were puzzling him. Where did Leviatt stand in this rustling business? That was part of the mystery. Stafford had told him that he had Leviatt's word that Radford was the thief who had been stealing the Two Diamond cattle. Stafford had said also that it had been Leviatt who had suggested employing a gunfighter—had even gone to Dry Bottom with the manager for the purpose of finding one. And now that

THE TWO-GUN MAN

one had been employed Leviatt had become suddenly antagonistic to him.

And Leviatt was in the habit of visiting the Radford cabin. Of course he might be doing this for the purpose of spying upon Ben Radford, but if that were the case why had he shown so venomous when he had seen Ferguson sitting on the porch on the evening of the day after the latter had been bitten by the rattler?

Mary Radford had told him that Leviatt was her brother's friend. If he was a friend of the brother why had he suggested that Stafford employ a gunfighter to shoot him? Here was more mystery.

On a day soon after the departure of the wagon outfit he rode away through the afternoon sunshine. Not long did his thoughts dwell upon the mystery of the range boss and Ben Radford. He kept seeing a young woman kneeling in front of him, bathing and binding his foot. Scraps of a conversation that he had not forgotten revolved in his mind and brought smiles to his lips.

"She didn't need to act so plum serious

THE FINDING OF THE ORPHAN

when she told me that I didn't know that I had any right to set there an' make pretty speeches to her. . . . She wouldn't need to ask me to stay at the cabin all night. I could have gone on to the Two Diamond. I reckon that snake bite wasn't so plum dangerous that I'd have died if I'd have rode a little while."

As he came out of a little gully a few miles up the river and rode along the crest of a ridge that rose above endless miles of plains, his thoughts went back to that first night in the bunkhouse when the outfit had come in from the range. Satisfaction glinted in his eyes.

"I reckon them boys didn't make good with her. An' I expect that some day Leviatt will find he's been wastin' his time."

He frowned at thought of Leviatt and unconsciously his spurs drove hard against the pony's flanks. The little animal sprang forward, tossing his head spiritedly. Ferguson grinned and patted its flank with a remorseful hand.

"Well, now, Mustard," he said, "I wasn't

THE TWO-GUN MAN

reckonin' on takin' my spite out on you. You don't expect I thought you was Leviatt." And he patted the flank again.

He rode down the long slope of the rise and struck the level, traveling at a slow lope through a shallow washout. The ground was broken and rocky here and the snake-like cactus caught at his stirrup leathers. A rattler warned from the shadow of some sage-brush and, remembering his previous experience, he paused long enough to shoot its head off.

"There," he said, surveying the shattered snake, "I reckon you ain't to blame for me bein' bit by your uncle or cousin, or somethin', but I ain't never goin' to be particular when I see one of your family swingin' their head that suggestive."

He rode on again, reloading his pistol. For a little time he traveled at a brisk pace and then he halted to breathe Mustard. Throwing one leg over the pommel, he turned half way around in the saddle and swept the plains with a casual glance.

He sat erect instantly, focusing his gaze

THE FINDING OF THE ORPHAN

upon a speck that loomed through a dust cloud some miles distant. For a time he watched the speck, his eyes narrowing. Finally he made out the speck to be a man on a pony.

"He's a-fannin' it some," he observed, shading his eyes with his hands; "hittin' up the breeze for fair." He meditated long, a critical smile reaching his lips.

"It's right warm to-day. Not just the kind of an atmosphere that a man ought to be runnin' his horse reckless in." He meditated again.

"How far would you say he's off, Mustard? Ten miles, I reckon you'd say if you was a knowin' horse."

The horseman had reached a slight ridge and for a moment he appeared on the crest of it, racing his pony toward the river. Then he suddenly disappeared.

Ferguson smiled coldly. Again his gaze swept the plains and the ridges about him. "I don't see nothin' that'd make a man ride like that in this heat," he said. "Where would he have come from?" He stared ob-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

liquely off at a deep gully almost hidden by an adjoining ridge.

"It's been pretty near an hour since I shot that snake. I didn't see no man about that time. If he was around here he must have heard my gun—an' sloped." He smiled and urged his pony about. "I reckon we'll go look around that gully a little, Mustard," he said.

Half an hour later he rode down into the gully. After going some little distance he came across a dead cow, lying close to an overhanging rock rim. A bullet hole in the cow's forehead told eloquently of the manner of her death.

Ferguson dismounted and laid a hand on her side. The body was still warm. A four-months' calf was nudging the mother with an inquisitive muzzle. Ferguson took a sharp glance at its ears and then drove it off to get a look at the brand. There was none.

"Sleeper," he said quietly. "With the Two Diamond ear-mark. Most range bosses make a mistake in not brandin' their calves. Seems as if they're trustin' to luck that

THE FINDING OF THE ORPHAN

rustlers won't work on them. I must have scared this one off."

He swung into the saddle, a queer light in his eyes. "Mustard, old boy, we're goin' to Bear Flat. Mebbe Radford's hangin' around there now. An' mebbe he ain't. But we're goin' to see."

But he halted a moment to bend a pitying glance at the calf.

"Poor little dogie," he said; "poor little orphan. Losin' your mother—just like a human bein'. I call that mean luck."

Then he was off, Mustard swinging in a steady lope down the gully and up toward the ridge that led to the river trail.

CHAPTER IX

WOULD YOU BE A "CHARACTER"?

THE sun was still a shimmering white blur in the great arc of sky when Ferguson rode around the corner of the cabin in Bear Flat, halted his pony, and sat quietly in the saddle before the door. His rapid eye had already swept the horse corral, the sheds, and the stable. If the horseman that he had seen riding along the ridge had been Radford he would not arrive for quite a little while. Meantime, he would learn from Miss Radford what direction the young man had taken on leaving the cabin.

Ferguson was beginning to take an interest in this game. At the outset he had come prepared to carry out his contract. In his code of ethics it was not a crime to shoot

A "CHARACTER"

a rustler. Experience had taught him that justice was to be secured only through drastic action. In the criminal category of the West the rustler took a place beside the horse thief and the man who shot from behind.

But before taking any action Ferguson must be convinced of the guilt of the man he was hunting, and nothing had yet occurred that would lead him to suspect Radford. He did not speculate on what course he would take should circumstances prove Radford to be the thief. Would the fact that he was Mary Radford's brother affect his decision? He preferred to answer that question when the time came—if it ever came. One thing was certain; he was not shooting anyone unless the provocation was great.

His voice was purposely loud when he called "Whoa, Mustard!" to his pony, but his eyes were not purposely bright and expectant as they tried to penetrate the semi-darkness of the interior of the cabin for a glimpse of Miss Radford.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

He heard a movement presently, and she was at the door looking at him, her hands folded in her apron, her eyes wide with unmistakable pleasure.

"Why, I never expected to see you again!" she exclaimed.

She came out and stood near the edge of the porch, making a determined attempt to subdue the flutter of excitement that was revealed in a pair of very bright eyes and a tinge of deep color in her cheeks.

"Then I reckon you thought I had died, or stampeded out of this country?" he answered, grinning. "I told you I'd be comin' back here."

But the first surprise was over, and she very properly retired to the shelter of a demurely polite reserve.

"So you did!" she made reply. "You told me you were comin' over to see my brother. But he is not here now."

Had he been less wise he would have reminded her that it had been she who had told him that he might come to see her brother. But to reply thus would have dis-

A "CHARACTER"

comfited her and perhaps have brought a sharp reply. He had no doubt that some of the other Two Diamond men had made similar mistakes, but not he. He smiled broadly. "Mebbe I did," he said; "sometimes I'm mighty careless in handlin' the truth. Mebbe I thought then that I'd come over to see your brother. But we have different thoughts at different times. You say your brother ain't here now?"

"He left early this morning to go down the river," she informed him. "He said he would be back before sun-down."

His eyes narrowed perceptibly. "Down" the river meant that Radford's trail led in the general direction of the spot where he had seen the fleeing horseman and the dead Two Diamond cow with her orphaned calf. Yet this proved nothing. Radford might easily have been miles away when the deed had been done. For the present there was nothing he could do, except to wait until Radford returned, to form whatever conclusions he might from the young man's appearance when he should find a Two Dia-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

mond man at the cabin. But anxiety to see the brother was not the only reason that would keep him waiting.

He removed his hat and sat regarding it with a speculative eye. Miss Radford smiled knowingly.

"I expect I have been scarcely polite," she said. "Won't you get off your horse?"

"Why, yes," he responded, obeying promptly; "I expect Mustard's been doin' a lot of wonderin' why I didn't get off before."

If he had meant to imply that her invitation had been tardy he had hit the mark fairly, for Miss Radford nibbled her lips with suppressed mirth. The underplay of meaning was not the only subtleness of the speech, for the tone in which it had been uttered was rich in interrogation, as though its author, while realizing the pony's dimness of perception, half believed the animal had noticed Miss Radford's lapse of hospitality.

"I'm thinkin' you are laughin' at me again, ma'am," he said as he came to the

A "CHARACTER"

edge of the porch and stood looking up at her, grinning.

"Do you think I am laughing?" she questioned, again biting her lips to keep them from twitching.

"No-o. I wouldn't say that you was laughin' with your lips—laughin' regular. But there's a heap of it inside of you—tryin' to get out."

"Don't you ever laugh inwardly?" she questioned.

He laughed frankly. "I expect there's times when I do."

"But you haven't lately?"

"Well, no, I reckon not."

"Not even when you thought your horse might have noticed that I had neglected to invite you off?"

"Did I think that?" he questioned.

"Of course you did."

"Well, now," he drawled. "An' so you took that much interest in what I was thinkin'! I reckon people who write must know a lot."

Her face expressed absolute surprise.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"Why, who told you that I wrote?" She questioned.

"Nobody told me, ma'am. I just heard it. I heard a man tell another man that you had threatened to make him a character in a book you was writin'."

Her face was suddenly convulsed. "I imagine I know whom you mean," she said. "A young cowboy from the Two Diamond used to annoy me quite a little, until one day I discouraged him."

His smile grew broad at this answer. But he grew serious instantly.

"I don't think there is much to write about in this country, ma'am," he said.

"You don't? Why, I believe you are trying to discourage me!"

"I reckon you won't listen to me, ma'am, if you want to write. I've heard that anyone who writes is a special kind of a person an' they just can't help writin'—any more'n I can help comin' over here to see your brother. You see, they like it a heap."

They both laughed, she because of the clever way in which he had turned the con-

A "CHARACTER"

versation to his advantage; he through sheer delight. But she did purpose to allow him to dwell on the point he had raised, so she adroitly took up the thread where he had broken off to apply his similitude.

"Some of that is true," she returned, giving him a look on her own account; "especially about a writer loving his work. But I don't think one needs to be a 'special' kind of person. One must be merely a keen observer."

He shook his head doubtfully. "I see everything that goes on around me," he returned. "Most of the time I can tell pretty near what sort a man is by lookin' at his face and watching the way he moves. But I reckon I'd never make a writer. Times when I look at this country—at a nice sunset, for instance, or think what a big place this country is—I feel like sayin' somethin' about it; somethin' inside of me seems kind of breathless-like—kind of scarin' me. But I couldn't write about it."

She had felt it, too, and more than once had sat down with her pencil to transcribe

THE TWO-GUN MAN

her thoughts. She thought that it was not exactly fear, but an overpowering realization of her own atomity; a sort of cringing of the soul away from the utter vastness of the world; a growing consciousness of the unlimited bigness of things; an insight of the infinite power of God—the yearning of the soul for understanding of the mysteries of life and existence.

She could sympathize with him, for she knew exactly how he had felt. She turned and looked toward the distant mountains, behind which the sun was just then swimming—a great ball of shimmering gold, which threw off an effulgent expanse of yellow light that was slowly turning into saffron and violet as it met the shadows below the hills.

“Whoever saw such colors?” she asked suddenly, her face transfixed with sheer delight.

“It’s cert’nly pretty, ma’am.”

She clapped her hands. “It is magnificent!” she declared enthusiastically. She came closer to him and stretched an arm to-

A "CHARACTER"

ward the mountains. "Look at that saffron shade which is just now blending with the streak of pearl striking the cleft between those hills! See the violet tinge that has come into that sea of orange, and the purple haze touching the snow-caps of the mountains. And now the flaming red, the deep yellow, the slate blue; and now that gauzy veil of lilac, rose, and amethyst, fading and dulling as the darker shadows rise from the valleys!"

Her flashing eyes sought Ferguson's. Twilight had suddenly come.

"It is the most beautiful country in the world!" she said positively.

He was regarding her with gravely humorous eyes. "It cert'nly is pretty, ma'am," he returned. "But you can't make a whole book out of one sunset."

Her eyes flashed. "No," she returned. "Nor can I make a whole book out of only one character. But I am going to try and draw a word picture of the West by writing of the things that I see. And I am going to try and have some real characters in it. I

THE TWO-GUN MAN

shall try to have them talk and act naturally."

She smiled suddenly and looked at him with a significant expression. "And the hero will not be an Easterner—to swagger through the pages of the book, scaring people into submission through the force of his compelling personality. He will be a cowboy who will do things after the manner of the country—a real, unaffected care-free puncher!"

"Have you got your eye on such a man?" he asked, assuring himself that he knew of no man who would fill the requirements she had named.

"I don't mind telling you that I have," she returned, looking straight at him.

It suddenly burst upon him. His face crimsoned. He felt like bolting. But he managed to grin, though she could see that the grin was forced.

"It's gettin' late, ma'am," he said, as he turned toward his pony. "I reckon I'll be gettin' back to the Two Diamond."

She laughed mockingly as he settled into

A "CHARACTER"

the saddle. There was a clatter of hoofs from around the corner of the cabin.

"Wait!" she commanded. "Ben is coming!"

But there was a rush of wind that ruffled her apron, a clatter, and she could hear Mustard's hoofs pounding over the matted mesquite that carpeted the clearing. Ferguson had fled.

CHAPTER X

DISAPPEARANCE OF THE ORPHAN

DURING the night Ferguson had dreamed dreams. A girl with fluffy brown hair and mocking eyes had been the center of many mental pictures that had haunted him. He had seen her seated before him, rapidly plying a pencil. Once he imagined he had peered over her shoulder. He had seen a sketch of a puncher, upon which she appeared to be working, representing a man who looked very like himself. He could remember that he had been much surprised. Did writers draw the pictures that appeared in their books?

This puncher was sitting in a chair; one foot was bandaged. As he watched over the girl's shoulder he saw the deft pencil

DISAPPEARANCE OF ORPHAN

forming the outlines of another figure—a girl. As this sketch developed he saw that it was to represent Miss Radford herself. It was a clever pencil that the girl wielded, for the scene was strikingly real. He even caught subtle glances from her eyes. But as he looked the scene changed and the girl stood at the edge of the porch, her eyes mocking him. And then to his surprise she spoke. "I am going to put you into a book," she said.

Then he knew why she had tolerated him. He had grown hot and embarrassed. "You ain't goin' to put me in any book, ma'am," he had said. "You ain't givin' me a square deal. I wouldn't love no girl that would put me into a book."

He had seen a sudden scorn in her eyes. "Love!" she said, her lips curling. "Do you really believe that I would allow a puncher to make love to me?"

And then the scene had changed again, and he was shooting the head off a rattler. "I don't want you to love me!" he had declared to it. And then while the snake

THE TWO-GUN MAN

writhed he saw another head growing upon it, and a face. It was the face of Leviatt; and there was mockery in this face also. While he looked it spoke.

"You'll nurse him so's he won't die?" it had said.

When he awakened his blood was surging with a riotous anger. The dream was bothering him now, as he rode away from the ranchhouse toward the gully where he had found the dead Two Diamond cow. He had not reported the finding of the dead cow, intending to return the next morning to look the ground over and to fetch the "dogie" back to the home ranch. It would be time enough then to make a report of the occurrence to Stafford.

It was mid-morning when he finally reached the gully and rode down into it. He found the dead cow still there. He dismounted to drive away some crows that had gathered around the body. Then he noticed that the calf had disappeared. It had strayed, perhaps. A calf could not be depended upon to remain very long beside

DISAPPEARANCE OF ORPHAN

its dead mother, though he had known cases where they had. But if it had strayed it could not be very far away. He remounted his pony and loped down the gully, reaching the ridge presently and riding along this, searching the surrounding country with keen glances. He could see no signs of the calf. He came to a shelf-rock presently, beside which grew a tangled gnarl of scrub-oak brush. Something lay in the soft sand and he dismounted quickly and picked up a leather tobacco pouch. He examined this carefully. There were no marks on it to tell who might be the owner.

"A man who loses his tobacco in this country is mighty careless," he observed, smiling; "or in pretty much of a hurry."

He went close to the thicket, looking down at it, searching the sand with interest. Presently he made out the impression of a foot in a soft spot and, looking further, saw two furrows that might have been made by a man kneeling. He knelt in the furrows himself and with one hand parted the brush. He smiled grimly as, peering into the gully, he

THE TWO-GUN MAN

saw the dead Two Diamond cow on the opposite side.

He stepped abruptly away from the thicket and looked about him. A few yards back there was a deep depression in the ridge, fringed with a growth of nondescript weed. He approached this and peered into it. Quite recently a horse had been there. He could plainly see the hoof-prints—where the animal had pawed impatiently. He returned to the thicket, convinced.

“Some one was here yesterday when I was down there lookin’ at that cow,” he decided. “They was watchin’ me. That man I seen ridin’ that other ridge was with the one who was here. Now why didn’t this man slope too?”

He stood erect, looking about him. Then he smiled.

“Why, it’s awful plain,” he said. “The man who was on this ridge was watchin’. He heard my gun go off, when I shot that snake. I reckon he figgered that if he tried to ride away on this ridge whoever’d done the shootin’ would see him. An’ so he didn’t go.

DISAPPEARANCE OF ORPHAN

He stayed right here an' watched me when I rode up." He smiled. "There ain't no use lookin' for that dogie. The man that stayed here has run him off."

There was nothing left for Ferguson to do. He mounted and rode slowly along the ridge, examining the tobacco pouch. And then suddenly he discovered something that brought an interested light to his eyes. Beneath the greasy dirt on the leather he could make out the faint outlines of two letters. Time had almost obliterated these, but by moistening his fingers and rubbing the dirt from the leather he was able to trace them. They had been burned in, probably branded with a miniature iron.

"D. L," he spelled.

He rode on again, his lips straightening into serious lines.

He mentally catalogued the names he had heard since coming to the Two Diamond. None answered for the initials "D. L." It was evident that the pouch could belong to no one but Dave Leviatt. In that case what had Leviatt been doing on the ridge? Why,

THE TWO-GUN MAN

he had been watching the rustler, of course. In that case the man must be known to him. But what had become of the dogie? What would have been Leviatt's duty, after the departure of the rustlers? Obviously to drive the calf to the herd and report the occurrence to the manager.

Leviatt may have driven the calf to the herd, but assuredly he had not reported the occurrence to the manager, for he had not been in to the ranchhouse. Why not?

Ferguson pondered long over this, while his pony traveled the river trail toward the ranchhouse. Finally he smiled. Of course, if the man on the ridge had been Leviatt, he must have been there still when Ferguson came up, or he would not have been there to drive the Two Diamond calf to the herd after Ferguson had departed. In that case he must have seen Ferguson, and must be waiting for the latter to make the report to the manager. But what motive would he have in this?

Here was more mystery. Ferguson might have gone on indefinitely arranging

DISAPPEARANCE OF ORPHAN

motives, but none of them would have brought him near the truth.

He could, however, be sure of three things. Leviatt had seen the rustler and must know him; he had seen Ferguson, and knew that he knew that a rustler had been in the gully before him; and for some mysterious reason he had not reported to the manager. But Ferguson had one advantage that pleased him, even drew a grim smile to his lips as he rode on his way. Leviatt may have seen him near the dead Two Diamond cow, but he certainly was not aware that Ferguson knew he himself had been there during the time that the rustler had been at work.

Practically, of course, this knowledge would avail Ferguson little. Yet it was a good thing to know, for Leviatt must have some reason for secrecy, and if anything developed later Ferguson would know exactly where the range boss stood in the matter.

Determined to investigate as far as possible, he rode down the river for a few miles, finally reaching a broad plain where the

THE TWO-GUN MAN

cattle were feeding. Some cowboys were scattered over this plain, and before riding very far Ferguson came upon Rope. The latter spurred close to him, grinning.

"I'm right glad to see you," said the puncher. "You've been keepin' yourself pretty scarce. Scared of another run-in with Leviatt?"

"Plum scared," returned Ferguson. "I reckon that man'll make me nervous—give him time."

"Yu' don't say?" grinned Rope. "I wasn't noticin' that you was worryin' about him."

"I'm right flustered," returned Ferguson. "Where's he now?"

"Gone down the crick—with Tucson."

Ferguson smoothed Mustard's mane. "Leviatt been with you right along?"

"He went up the crick yesterday," returned Rope, looking quickly at the stray-man.

"Went alone, I reckon?"

"With Tucson." Rope was trying to conceal his interest in these questions.

DISAPPEARANCE OF ORPHAN

But apparently Ferguson's interest was only casual. He turned a quizzical eye upon Rope. "You an' Tucson gettin' along?" he questioned.

"Me an' him's of the same mind about one thing," returned Rope.

"Well, now." Ferguson's drawl was pregnant with humor. "You surprise me. An' so you an' him have agreed. I reckon you ain't willin' to tell me what you've agreed about?"

"I'm sure tellin'," grinned Rope. "Me an' him's each dead certain that the other's a low down horse thief."

The eyes of the two men met fairly. Both smiled.

"Then I reckon you an' Tucson are lovin' one another about as well as me an' Leviatt," observed Ferguson.

"There ain't a turruble lot of difference," agreed Rope.

"An' so Tucson's likin' you a heap," drawled Ferguson absently. He gravely contemplated the puncher. "I expect you was a long ways off yesterday when Leviatt

THE TWO-GUN MAN

an' Tucson come in from up the crick?" he asked.

"Not a turruble ways off," returned Rope. "I happened to have this end an' they passed right close to me. They clean forgot to speak."

"Well, now," said Ferguson. "That was sure careless of them. But I reckon they was busy at somethin' when they passed. In that case they wouldn't have time to speak. I've heard tell that some folks can't do more'n one thing at a time."

Rope laughed. "They was puttin' in a heap of their time tryin' to make me believe they didn't see me," he returned. "Otherwise they wasn't doin' anything."

"Shucks!" declared Ferguson heavily. "I reckon them men wouldn't go out of their way to drive a poor little dogie in off the range. They're that hard hearted."

"Correct," agreed Rope. "You ain't missin' them none there."

Ferguson smiled, urging his pony about. "I'm figgerin' on gettin' back to the Two Diamond," he said. He rode a few feet

DISAPPEARANCE OF ORPHAN

and then halted, looking back over his shoulder. "You ain't givin' Tucson no chancst to say you drawed first?" he warned.

Rope laughed grimly. "If there's any shootin' goin' on," he replied, "Tucson ain't goin' to say nothin' after it's over."

"Well, so-long," said Ferguson, urging his pony forward. He heard Rope's answer, and then rode on, deeply concerned over his discovery.

Leviatt and Tucson had ridden up the river the day before. They had returned empty handed. And so another link had been added to the chain of mystery. Where was the dogie?

CHAPTER XI

A TOUCH OF LOCAL COLOR

A FEW months before her first meeting with Ferguson, Mary Radford had come West with the avowed purpose of "absorbing enough local color for a Western novel." Friends in the East had encouraged her; an uncle (her only remaining relative, beside her brother) had assisted her. So she had come.

The uncle (under whose care she had been since the death of her mother, ten years before) had sent her to a medical college, determined to make her a finished physician. But Destiny had stepped in. Quite by accident Miss Radford had discovered that she could write, and the uncle's hope that she might one day grace the medical profession

A TOUCH OF LOCAL COLOR

had gone glimmering—completely buried under a mass of experimental manuscript.

He professed to have still a ray of hope until after several of the magazines had accepted Mary's work. Then hope died and was succeeded by silent acquiescence and patient resignation. Having a knowledge of human nature far beyond that possessed by the average person, the uncle had realized that if Mary's inclination led to literature it was worse than useless to attempt to interest her in any other profession. Therefore, when she had announced her intention of going West he had interposed no objection; on the contrary had urged her to the venture. What might have been his attitude had not Ben Radford been already in the West is problematical. Very seldom do we decide a thing until it confronts us.

Mary Radford had been surprised at the West. From Ben's cabin in the flat she had made her first communion with this new world that she had worshipped at first sight. It was as though she had stepped out of an old world into one that was just experien-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

cing the dawn of creation's first morning. At least so it had seemed to her on the morning she had first stepped outside her brother's cabin to view her first sunrise.

She had breathed the sweet, moisture-laden breezes that had seemed to almost steal over the flat where she had stood watching the shadows yield to the coming sun. The somber hills had become slowly outlined; the snow caps of the distant mountain peaks glinted with the brilliant shafts that struck them and reflected into the dark recesses below. Nature was king here and showed its power in a mysterious, though convincing manner.

In the evening there would come a change. Through rifts in the mountains descended the sun, spreading an effulgent expanse of yellow light—like burnished gold. In the shadows were reflected numerous colors, all quietly blended, making contrasts of perfect harmony. There were the sinuous buttes that bordered the opposite shore of the river—solemn sentinels guarding the beauty and purity of this virgin land. Near her were

A TOUCH OF LOCAL COLOR

sloping hills, dotted with thorny cactus and other prickly plants, and now rose a bald rock spire with its suggestion of grim loneliness. In the southern and eastern distances were the plains, silent, vast, unending. It seemed she had come to dwell in a land deserted by some cyclopean race. Its magnificent, unchanging beauty had enthralled her.

She had not lacked company. She found that the Two Diamond punchers were eager to gain her friendship. Marvelous excuses were invented for their appearance at the cabin in the flat. She thought that Ben's friendship was valued above that of all other persons in the surrounding country.

But she found the punchers gentlemen. Though their conversation was unique and their idioms picturesque, they compared favorably with the men she had known in the East. Did they lack the subtleties, they made up for this by their unfailing deference. And they were never rude; their very bashfulness prevented that.

Through them she came to know much of

THE TWO-GUN MAN

many things. They contrived to acquaint her with the secretive peculiarities of the prairie dog, and—when she would listen with more than ordinary attention—they would loose their wonderful imaginations in the hope of continuing the conversation. Then it was that the subject under discussion would receive exhaustive, and altogether unnecessary, elucidation. The habits of the prairie-dog were not alone betrayed to the ears of the young lady. The sage-fowl's inherent weaknesses were paraded before her; the hoot of the owl was imitated with ludicrous solemnity; other fowl were described with wonderful attention to detail; and the inevitable rattlesnake was pointed out to her as a serpent whose chief occupation in life was that of posing in the shadow of the sage-brush as a target for the revolver of the cowpuncher.

The quaintness of the cowboy speech, his incomparable bashfulness, amused her, while she was strangely affected by his earnestness. She attended to the chickens and immediately her visitors became interested in them

A TOUCH OF LOCAL COLOR

and fell to discussing them as though they had done nothing all their days but build hen-houses and runways. But she had them on botany. The flower beds were deep, unfathomable mysteries to them, and they stood afar while she cultivated the more difficult plants and encouraged the hardier to increased beauty.

But she had not been content to view this land of mystery from her brother's cabin. The dignity of nature had cast its thrall upon her. She was impressed with the sublimity of the climate, the wonderful sunshine, the crystal light of the days and the quiet peace and beauty of the nights. The lure of the plains had taken her upon long rides, and the cottonwood, filling a goodly portion of the flat, was the scene of many of her explorations.

The pony with which her brother had provided her was—Ben Radford declared—a shining example of sterling horse-honesty. She did not know that Ben knew horses quite as well as he knew men or she would not have allowed him to see the skeptical glance

THE TWO-GUN MAN

she had thrown over the drowsy-eyed beast that he saddled for her. But she was overjoyed at finding the pony all that her brother had said of it. The little animal was tireless, and often, after a trip over the plains, or to Dry Bottom to mail a letter, she would return by a roundabout trail.

Meanwhile the novel still remained unwritten. Perhaps she had not yet "absorbed" the "local color"; perhaps inspiration was tardy. At all events she had not written a word. But she was beginning to realize the possibilities; deep in her soul something was moving that would presently flow from her pen.

It would not be commonplace—that she knew. Real people would move among the pages of her book; real deeds would be done. And as the days passed she decided. She would write herself into her book; there would be the first real character. The story would revolve about her and another character—a male one—upon whom she had not decided—until the appearance of Ferguson. After he had come she was no longer un-

A TOUCH OF LOCAL COLOR

decided—she would make him the hero of her story.

The villain she had already met—in Leviatt. Something about this man was repellant. She already had a description of him in the note book that she always carried. Had Leviatt read the things she had written of him he would have discontinued his visits to the cabin.

Several of the Two Diamond punchers, also, were noted as being possible secondary characters. She had found them very amusing. But the hero would be the one character to whom she would devote the concentrated effort of her mind. She would make him live in the pages; a real, forceful magnetic human being that the reader would instantly admire. She would bare his soul to the reader; she would reveal his mental processes—not involved, but leading straight and true to——

But would she? Had she not so far discovered a certain craftiness in the character of the Two Diamond stray-man that would indicate subtlety of thought?

THE TWO-GUN MAN

This knowledge had been growing gradually upon her since their second meeting, and it had become an obstacle that promised difficulties. Of course she could make Ferguson talk and act as she pleased—in the book. But if she wanted a real character she would have to portray him as he was. To do this would require study. Serious study of any character would inspire faithful delineation.

She gave much thought to him now, keeping this purpose in view. She questioned Ben concerning him, but was unable to gain satisfying information. He had been hired by Stafford, her brother told her, holding the position of stray-man.

“I’ve seen him once, down the other side of the cottonwood,” the young man had said. “He ain’t saying much to anyone. Seems to be a quiet sort—and deep. Pretty good sort though.”

She was pleased over Ben’s brief estimate of the stray-man. It vindicated her judgment. Besides, it showed that her brother was not averse to friendship with him.

A TOUCH OF LOCAL COLOR

Leviatt she saw with her brother often, and occasionally he came to the cabin. His attitude toward her was one of frank admiration, but he had received no encouragement. How could he know that he was going to be the villain in her book—soon to be written?

Shall we take a peep into that mysterious note book? Yes, for later we shall see much of it.

“Dave Leviatt,” she had written in one place. “Age thirty-five. Tall, slender; walks with a slight stoop. One rather gets the impression that the stoop is a reflection of the man’s nature, which seems vindictive and suggests a low cunning. His eyes are small, deep set, and glitter when he talks. But they are steady, and cold—almost merciless. One’s thoughts go instantly to the tiger. I shall try to create that impression in the reader’s mind.”

In another place she had jotted this down: “I shouldn’t want anyone killed in my book, but if I find this to be necessary Leviatt must do the murder. But I think it would

THE TWO-GUN MAN

be better to have him employ some other person to do it for him; that would give him just the character that would fit him best. I want to make him seem too cowardly—no, not cowardly, because I don't think he is a coward; but too cunning—to take chances of being caught."

Evidently she had been questioning Ben, for in another place she had written:

"Ferguson. I must remember this—all cowboys do not carry two guns. Ben does, because he says he is ambidextrous, shooting equally well with either hand. But he does not tie the bottoms of his holsters down, like Ferguson; he says some men do this, but usually they are men who are exceptionally rapid in getting their revolvers out and that tying down the bottoms of the holsters facilitates removing the weapons. They are accounted to be dangerous men.

"Ben says when a man is quick to shoot out here he is called a gun-man, and that if he carries two revolvers he is a two-gun man. Ben laughs at me when I speak of a 'revolver'; they are known merely as 'guns' out

A TOUCH OF LOCAL COLOR

here. I must remember this. Ben says that though he likes Ferguson quite well, he is rather suspicious of him. He seems to be unable to understand why Stafford should employ a two-gun man to look up stray cows."

Below this appeared a brief reference to Ferguson.

"He is not a bit conceited—rather bashful, I should say. But embarrassment in him is attractive. No hero should be conceited. There is a wide difference between impertinence and frankness. Ferguson seems to speak frankly, but with a subtle shade. I think this is a very agreeable trait for a hero in a novel."

There followed more interesting scraps concerning Leviatt, which would have caused the range boss many bad moments. And there were interesting bits of description—jotted down when she became impressed with a particularly odd view of the country. But there were no more references to Ferguson. He—being the hero of her novel—must be studied thoroughly.

CHAPTER XII

THE STORY BEGINS

MISS RADFORD tied her pony to the trunk of a slender fir-balsam and climbed to the summit of a small hill. There were some trees, quite a bit of grass, some shrubbery, on the hill—and no snakes. She made sure of this before seating herself upon a little shelf of rock, near a tall cedar.

Half a mile down the river she could see a corner of Ben's cabin, a section of the corral fence, and one of the small outbuildings. Opposite the cabin, across the river, rose the buttes that met her eyes always when she came to the cabin door. This hill upon which she sat was one that she saw often, when in the evening, watching the

THE STORY BEGINS

setting sun, she followed its golden rays with her eyes. Many times, as the sun had gone slowly down into a rift of the mountains, she had seen the crest of this hill shimmering in a saffron light; the only spot in the flat that rose above the somber, oncoming shadows of the dusk.

* From here, it seemed, began the rose veil that followed the broad saffron shaft that led straight to the mountains. Often, watching the beauty of the hill during the long sunset, she had felt a deep awe stirring her. Romance was here, and mystery; it was a spot favored by the Sun-Gods, who surrounded it with a glorious halo, lingeringly, reluctantly withdrawing as the long shadows of the twilight crept over the face of the world.

It was not her first visit to the hill. Many times she had come here, charmed with the beauty of the view, and during one of those visits she had decided that seated on the shelf rock on the summit of the hill she would write the first page of the book. It was for this purpose that she had now come.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

After seating herself she opened a small handbag, producing therefrom many sheets of paper, a much-thumbed copy of Shakespeare, and a pencil. She was tempted to begin with a description of the particular bit of country upon which she looked, for long ago she had decided upon Bear Flat for the locale of the story. But she sat long nibbling at the end of the pencil, delaying the beginning for fear of being unable to do justice to it.

She began at length, making several false starts and beginning anew. Finally came a paragraph that remained. Evidently this was satisfactory, for another paragraph followed; and then another, and still another. Presently a complete page. Then she looked up with a long-drawn sigh of relief. The start had been made.

She had drawn a word picture of the flat; dwelling upon the solitude, the desolation, the vastness, the swimming sunlight, the absence of life and movement. But as she looked, critically comparing what she had written with the reality, there came a move-

THE STORY BEGINS

ment—a horseman had ridden into her picture. He had come down through a little gully that led into the flat and was loping his pony through the deep saccatone grass toward the cabin.

It couldn't be Ben. Ben had told her that he intended riding some thirty miles down the river and he couldn't be returning already. She leaned forward, watching intently, the story forgotten.

The rider kept steadily on for a quarter of an hour. Then he reached the clearing in which the cabin stood; she saw him ride through it and disappear. Five minutes later he reappeared, hesitated at the edge of the clearing and then urged his pony toward the hill upon which she sat. As he rode out of the shadows of the trees within an eighth of a mile of her the sunlight shone fairly upon the pony. She would have known Mustard among many other ponies.

She drew a sudden, deep breath and sat erect, tucking back some stray wisps of hair from her forehead. Did the rider see her?

For a moment it seemed that the answer

THE TWO-GUN MAN

would be negative, for he disappeared behind some dense shrubbery on the plain below and seemed to be on the point of passing the hill. But just at the edge of the shrubbery Mustard suddenly swerved and came directly toward her. Through the corners of her eyes she watched while Ferguson dismounted, tied Mustard close to her own animal, and stood a moment quietly regarding her.

"You want to look at the country all by yourself?" he inquired.

She pretended a start, looking down at him in apparent surprise.

"Why," she prevaricated, "I thought there was no one within miles of me!"

She saw his eyes flash in the sunlight. "Of course," he drawled, "there's such an awful darkness that no one could see a pony comin' across the flat. You think you'll be able to find your way home?"

She flushed guiltily and did not reply. She heard him clambering up over the loose stones, and presently he stood near her. She made a pretense of writing.

THE STORY BEGINS

"Did you stop at the cabin?" she asked without looking up.

He regarded her with amused eyes, standing loosely, his arms folded, the fingers of his right hand pulling at his chin. "Did I stop?" he repeated. "I couldn't rightly say. Seems to me as though I did. You see, I didn't intend to, but I was ridin' down that way an' I thought I'd stop in an' have a talk with Ben."

"Oh!" Sometimes even a monosyllable is pregnant with mockery.

"But he wasn't there. Nobody was there. I wasn't reckonin' on everybody runnin' off."

She turned and looked straight at him. "Why," she said, "I shouldn't think our running away would surprise you. You see, you set us an example in running away the other day."

He knew instantly that she referred to his precipitate retreat on the night she had hinted that she intended putting him into her story. She shot another glance at him and saw his face redden with embarrass-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

ment, but he showed no intention of running now.

"I've been thinkin' of what you said," he returned. "You couldn't put me into no book. You don't know anything about me. You don't know what I think. Then how could you do it?"

"Of course," she returned, turning squarely around to him and speaking seriously, "the story will be fiction, and the plot will have no foundation in fact. But I shall be very careful to have my characters talk and act naturally. To do this I shall have to study the people whom I wish to characterize."

He was moved by an inward mirth. "You're still thinkin' of puttin' me into the book?" he questioned.

She nodded, smiling.

"Then," he said, very gravely, "you hadn't ought to have told me. You didn't show so clever there. Ain't you afraid that I'll go to actin' swelled? If I do that, you'd not have the character you wanted."

"I had thought of that, too," she returned

THE STORY BEGINS

seriously. "If you were that kind of a man I shouldn't want you in the book. How do you know that I haven't told you for the purpose of discovering if you would be affected in that manner?"

He scratched his head, contemplating her gravely. "I reckon you're travelin' too fast for me, ma'am," he said.

His expression of frank amusement was good to see. He stood before her, plainly ready to surrender. Absolutely boyish, he seemed to her—a grown-up boy to be sure, but with a boy's enthusiasms, impulses, and generosity. Yet in his eyes was something that told of maturity, of conscious power, of perfect trust in his ability to give a good account of himself, even in this country where these qualities constituted the chief rule of life.

A strange emotion stirred her, a sudden quickening of the pulse told her that something new had come into her life. She drew a deep, startled breath and felt her cheeks crimsoning. She swiftly turned her head and gazed out over the flat, leaving him

THE TWO-GUN MAN

standing there, scarcely comprehending her embarrassment.

"I reckon you've been writin' some of that book, ma'am," he said, seeing the papers lying on the rock beside her. "I don't see why you should want to write a Western story. Do folks in the East get interested in knowin' what's goin' on out here?"

She suddenly thought of herself. Had she found it interesting? She looked swiftly at him, appraising him from a new viewpoint, feeling a strange, new interest in him.

"It would be strange if they didn't," she returned. "Why, it is the only part of the country in which there still remains a touch of romance. You must remember that this is a young country; that its history began at a comparatively late date. England can write of its feudal barons; France of its ancient aristocracy; but America can look back only to the Colonial period—and the West."

"Mebbe you're right," he said, not convinced. "But I expect there ain't a heap of romance out here. Leastways, if there is it manages to keep itself pretty well hid."

THE STORY BEGINS

She smiled, thinking of the romance that surrounded him—of which, plainly, he was not conscious. To him, romance meant the lights, the crowds, the amusements, the glitter and tinsel of the cities of the East, word of which had come to him through various channels. To her these things were no longer novel,—if they had ever been so—and so for her romance must come from the new, the unusual, the unconventional. The West was all this, therefore romance dwelt here.

“Of course it all seems commonplace to you,” she returned; “perhaps even monotonous. For you have lived here long.”

He laughed. “I’ve traveled a heap,” he said. “I’ve been in California, Dakota, Wyoming, Texas, an’ Arizona. An’ now I’m here. Savin’ a man meets different people, this country is pretty much all the same.”

“You must have had a great deal of experience,” she said. “And you are not very old.”

He gravely considered her. “I would say

THE TWO-GUN MAN

that I am about the average age for this country. You see, folks don't live to get very old out here—unless they're mighty careful."

"And you haven't been careful?"

He smiled gravely. "I expect you wouldn't call it careful. But I'm still livin'."

His words were singularly free from boast.

"That means that you have escaped the dangers," she said. "I have heard that a man's safety in this country depends largely upon his ability to shoot quickly and accurately. I suppose you are accounted a good shot?"

The question was too direct. His eyes narrowed craftily.

"I expect you're thinkin' of that book now ma'am," he said. "There's a heap of men c'n shoot. You might say they're all good shots. I've told you about the men who can't shoot good. They're either mighty careful, or they ain't here any more. It's always one or the other."

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed, shuddering

THE STORY BEGINS

slightly. "In that case I suppose the hero in my story will have to be a good shot." She laughed. "I shouldn't want him to get half way through the story and then be killed because he was clumsy in handling his weapon. I am beginning to believe that I shall have to make him a 'two-gun' man. I understand they are supposed to be very good shots."

"I've seen them that wasn't," he returned gravely and shortly.

"How did you prove that?" she asked suddenly.

But he was not to be snared. "I didn't say I'd proved it," he stated. "But I've seen it proved."

"How proved?"

"Why," he said, his eyes glinting with amusement, "they ain't here any more, ma'am."

"Oh. Then it doesn't follow that because a man wears two guns he is more likely to survive than is the man who wears only one?"

"I reckon not, ma'am."

"I see that you have the bottoms of your

THE TWO-GUN MAN

holsters tied down," she said, looking at them. "Why have you done that?"

"Well," he declared, drawling his words a little, "I've always found that there ain't any use of takin' chances on an accident. You mightn't live to tell about it. An' havin' the bottoms of your holsters tied down keeps your guns from snaggin'. I've seen men whose guns got snagged when they wanted to use them. They wasn't so active after."

"Then I shall have to make my hero a 'two-gun' man," she said. "That is decided. Now, the next thing to do is to give some attention to his character. I think he ought to be absolutely fearless and honest and incapable of committing a dishonorable deed. Don't you think so?"

While they had talked he had come closer to her and stood beside the shelf rock, one foot resting on it. At her question he suddenly looked down at the foot, shifting it nervously, while a flush started from above the blue scarf at his throat and slowly suffused his face.

THE STORY BEGINS

"Don't you think so?" she repeated, her eyes meeting his for an instant.

"Why, of course, ma'am," he suddenly answered, the words coming sharply, as though he had only at that instant realized the import of the question.

"Why," said she, aware of his embarrassment, "don't you think there are such men?"

"I expect there are, ma'am," he returned; "but in this country there's a heap of argument could be made about what would be dishonorable. If your two-gun should happen to be a horse thief, or a rustler, I reckon we could get at it right off."

"He shan't be either of those," she declared stoutly. "I don't think he would stoop to such contemptible deeds. In the story he is employed by a ranch owner to kill a rustler whom the owner imagines has been stealing his cattle."

His hands were suddenly behind him, the fingers clenched. His eyes searched her face with an alert, intense gaze. His embarrassment was gone; his expression was saturnine, his eyes narrowed with a slight mock-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

ery. And his voice came, cold, deliberate, even.

"I reckon you've got your gun-man true to life, ma'am," he said.

She laughed lightly, amused over the sudden change that she saw and felt in him. "Of course the gun-man doesn't really intend to kill the rustler," she said. "I don't believe I shall have any one killed in the story. The gun-man is merely attracted by the sum of money promised him by the ranch owner, and when he accepts it is only because he is in dire need of work. Don't you think that could be possible?"

"That could happen easy in this country, ma'am," he returned.

She laughed delightedly. "That vindicates my judgment," she declared.

He was regarding her with unwavering eyes. "Is that gun-man goin' to be the hero in your story, ma'am?" he asked quietly.

"Why, of course."

"An' I'm to be him?"

She gave him a defiant glance, though she blushed immediately.

THE STORY BEGINS

"Why do you ask?" she questioned in reply. "You need have no fear that I will compel my hero to do anything dishonorable."

"I ain't fearin' anything," he returned. "But I'd like to know how you come to think of that. Do writers make them things up out of their own minds, or does someone tell them?"

"Those things generally have their origin in the mind of the writer," she replied.

"Meanin' that you thought of that yourself?" he persisted.

"Of course."

He lifted his foot from the rock and stood looking gravely at her. "In most of the books I have read there's always a villain. I reckon you're goin' to have one?"

"There will be a villain," she returned.

His eyes flashed queerly. "Would you mind tellin' me who you have picked out for your villain?" he continued.

"I don't mind," she said. "It is Leviatt."

He suddenly grinned broadly and held out his right hand to her. "Shake, ma'am," he

THE TWO-GUN MAN

said. "I reckon if I was writin' a book Leviatt would be the villain."

She rose from the rock and took his outstretched hand, her eyes drooping as they met his. He felt her hand tremble a little, and he looked at it, marveling. She glanced up, saw him looking at her hand, swiftly withdrew it, and turned from him, looking down into the flat at the base of the hill. She started, uttering the sharp command: "Look!"

Perhaps a hundred yards distant, sitting on his pony in a lounging attitude, was a horseman. While they looked the horseman removed his broad brimmed hat, bowed mockingly, and urged his pony out into the flat. It was Leviatt.

On the slight breeze a laugh floated back to them, short, sharp, mocking.

For a time they stood silent, watching the departing rider. Then Ferguson's lips wreathed into a feline smile.

"Kind of dramatic, him ridin' up that-away," he said. "Don't you think puttin' him in the book will spoil it, ma'am?"

CHAPTER XIII

“DO YOU SMOKE?”

L EVIATT rode down through the gully where Miss Radford had first caught sight of Ferguson when he had entered the flat. He disappeared in this and five minutes later came out upon a ridge above it. The distance was too great to observe whether he turned to look back. But just before he disappeared finally they saw him sweep his hat from his head. It was a derisive motion, and Miss Radford colored and shot a furtive glance at Ferguson.

The latter stood loosely beside her, his hat brim pulled well down over his forehead. As she looked she saw his eyes narrow and his lips curve ironically.

“What do you suppose he thought?” she questioned, her eyes drooping away from his.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"Him?" Ferguson laughed. "I expect you could see from his actions that he wasn't a heap tickled." Some thought was moving him mightily. He chuckled gleefully. "Now if you could only put what he was thinkin' into your book, ma'am, it sure would make interestin' readin'."

"But he saw you holding my hand!" she declared, aware of the uselessness of telling him this, but unable to repress her indignation over the thought that Leviatt had seen.

"Why, I expect he did, ma'am!" he returned, trying hard to keep the pleasure out of his voice. "You see, he must have been lookin' right at us. But there ain't nothin' to be flustered over. I reckon that some day, if he's around, he'll see me holdin' your hand again."

The red in her cheeks deepened. "Why, how conceited you are!" she said, trying to be very severe, but only succeeding in making him think that her eyes were prettier than he had thought.

"I don't think I am conceited, ma'am," he returned, smiling. "I've liked you right

"DO YOU SMOKE?"

well since the beginning. I don't think it's conceit to tell a lady that you're thinkin' of holdin' her hand."

She was looking straight at him, trying to be very defiant. "And so you have liked me?" she taunted. "I am considering whether to tell you that I was not thinking of you as a possible admirer."

His eyes flashed. "I don't think you mean that, ma'am," he said. "You ain't treated me like you treated some others."

"Some others?" she questioned, not comprehending.

He laughed. "Them other Two Diamond men that took a shine to you. I've heard that you talked right sassy to them. But you ain't never been sassy to me. Leastways, you ain't never told me to 'evaporate'."

She was suddenly convulsed. "They have told you that?" she questioned. And then not waiting for an answer she continued more soberly: "And so you thought that in view of what I have said to those men you had been treated comparatively

THE TWO-GUN MAN

civilly. I am afraid I have underestimated you. Hereafter I shall talk less intimately to you."

"I wouldn't do that, ma'am," he pleaded. "You don't need to be afraid that I'll be too fresh."

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed, with a pretense of delight. "It will be very nice to know that I can talk to you without fear of your placing a false construction on my words. But I am not afraid of you."

He stepped back from the rock, hitching at his cartridge belt. "I'm goin' over to the Two Diamond now, ma'am," he said. "And since you've said you ain't afraid of me, I'm askin' you if you won't go ridin' with me tomorrow. There's a right pretty stretch of country about fifteen miles up the crick that you'd be tickled over."

Should she tell him that she had explored all of the country within thirty miles? The words trembled on her lips but remained unspoken.

"Why, I don't know," she objected. "Do you think it is quite safe?"

"DO YOU SMOKE?"

He smiled and stepped away from her, looking back over his shoulder. "Thank you, ma'am," he said. "I'll ride over for you some time in the mornin'." He continued down the hill, loose stones rattling ahead of him. She looked after him, radiant.

"But I didn't say I would go," she called. And then, receiving no answer to this, she waited until he had swung into the saddle and was waving a farewell to her.

"Don't come before ten o'clock!" she advised.

She saw him smile and then she returned to her manuscript.

When the Sun-Gods kissed the crest of the hill and bathed her in the rich rose colors that came straight down to the hill through the rift in the mountains, she rose and gathered up her papers. She had not written another line.

It was late in the afternoon when Leviatt rode up to the door of Stafford's office and dismounted. He took plenty of time walk-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

ing the short distance that lay between him and the door, and growled a savage reply to a loafing puncher, who asked him a question. Once in the office he dropped glumly into a chair, his eyes glittering vengefully as his gaze rested on Stafford, who sat at his desk, engaged in his accounts. Through the open window Stafford had seen the range boss coming and therefore when the latter had entered he had not looked up.

Presently he finished his work and drew back from the desk. Then he took up a pipe, filled it with tobacco, lighted it, and puffed with satisfaction.

"Nothin's happened?" he questioned, glancing at his range boss.

Leviatt's reply was short. "No. Dropped down to see how things was runnin'."

"Things is quiet," returned Stafford. "There ain't been any cattle missed for a long time. I reckon the new stray-man is doin' some good."

Leviatt's eyes glowed. "If you call gassin' with Mary Radford doin' good, why then, he's doin' it!" he snapped.

"DO YOU SMOKE?"

"I ain't heard that he's doin' that," returned Stafford.

"I'm tellin' you about it now," said Leviatt. "I seen him to-day; him an' her holdin' hands on top of a hill in Bear Flat." He sneered. "He's a better ladies' man than a gunfighter. I reckon we made a mistake in pickin' him up."

Stafford smiled indulgently. "He's cert'nly a good looker," he said. "I reckon some girls would take a shine to him. But I ain't questionin' his shootin'. I've been in this country a right smart while an' I ain't never seen another man that could bore a can six times while it's in the air."

Leviatt's lips drooped. "He could do that an' not have nerve enough to shoot a coyote. Him not clashin' with Ben Radford proves he ain't got nerve."

Stafford smiled. The story of how the stray-man had closed Leviatt's mouth was still fresh in his memory. He was wondering whether Leviatt knew that he had heard about the incident.

"Suppose you try him?" he suggested.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"That'd be as good a way as any to find out if he's got nerve."

Leviatt's face bloated poisonously, but he made no answer. Apparently unaware that he had touched a tender spot Stafford continued.

"Mebbe his game is to get in with the girl, figgerin' that he'll be more liable that way to get a chanest at Ben Radford. But whatever his game is, I ain't interferin'. He's got a season contract an' I ain't breakin' my word with the cuss. I ain't takin' no chances with him."

Leviatt rose abruptly, his face swelling with an anger that he was trying hard to suppress. "He'd better not go to foolin' with Mary Radford, damn him!" he snapped.

"I reckon that wind is blowin' in two directions," grinned Stafford. "When I see him I'll tell him——" A clatter of hoofs reached the ears of the two men, and Stafford turned to the window. "Here's the stray-man now," he said gravely.

Both men were silent when Ferguson

"DO YOU SMOKE?"

reached the door. He stood just inside, looking at Stafford and Leviatt with cold, alert eyes. He nodded shortly to Stafford, not removing his gaze from the range boss. The latter deliberately turned his back and looked out of the window.

There was insolence in the movement, but apparently it had no effect upon the stray-man, beyond bringing a queer twitch into the corners of his mouth. He smiled at Stafford.

"Anything new?" questioned the latter, as he had questioned Leviatt.

"Nothin' doin'," returned Ferguson.

Leviatt now turned from the window. He spoke to Stafford, sneering. "Ben Radford's quite a piece away from where he's hangin' out," he said. He again turned to the window.

Ferguson's lips smiled, but his eyes narrowed. Stafford stiffened in his chair. He watched the stray-man's hands furtively, fearing the outcome of this meeting. But Ferguson's hands were nowhere near his guns. They were folded over his chest—

THE TWO-GUN MAN

lightly—the fingers of his right hand caressing his chin.

“You ridin’ up the crick to-day?” he questioned of Leviatt. His tone was mild, yet there was a peculiar quality in it that hinted at hardness.

“No,” answered Leviatt, without turning.

Ferguson began rolling a cigarette. When he had done this he lighted it and puffed slowly. “Well, now,” he said, “that’s mighty peculiar. ‘I’d swore that I saw you over in Bear Flat.’”

Leviatt turned. “You’ve been pickin’ posies too long with Mary Radford,” he sneered.

Ferguson smiled. “Mebbe I have,” he returned. “There’s them that she’ll let pick posies with her, an’ them that she won’t.”

Leviatt’s face crimsoned with anger. “I reckon if you hadn’t been monkeyin’ around too much with the girl, you’d have run across that dead Two Diamond cow an’ the dogie that she left,” he sneered.

Ferguson’s lips straightened. “How far

"DO YOU SMOKE?"

off was you standin' when that cow died?" he drawled.

A curse writhed through Leviatt's lips. "Why, you damned——"

"Don't!" warned Ferguson. He coolly stepped toward Leviatt, holding by the thongs the leather tobacco pouch from which he had obtained the tobacco to make his cigarette. When he had approached close to the range boss he held the pouch up before his eyes.

"I reckon you'd better have a smoke," he said quietly; "they say it's good for the nerves." He took a long pull at the cigarette. "It's pretty fair tobacco," he continued. "I found it about ten miles up the crick, on a ridge above a dry arroyo. I reckon it's your'n. It's got your initials on it."

The eyes of the two men met in a silent battle. Leviatt's were the first to waver. Then he reached out and took the pouch. "It's mine," he said shortly. Again he looked straight at Ferguson, his eyes carrying a silent message.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"You see anything else?" he questioned.

Ferguson smiled. "I ain't sayin' anything about anything else," he returned.

Thus, unsuspectingly, did Stafford watch and listen while these two men arranged to carry on their war man to man, neither asking any favor from the man who, with a word, might have settled it. With his reply that he wasn't "sayin' anything about anything else," Ferguson had told Leviatt that he had no intention of telling his suspicions to any man. Nor from this moment would Leviatt dare whisper a derogatory word into the manager's ear concerning Ferguson.

CHAPTER XIV

ON THE EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

NOW that Ferguson was satisfied beyond doubt that Leviatt had been concealed in the thicket above the bed of the arroyo where he had come upon the dead Two Diamond cow, there remained but one disturbing thought: who was the man he had seen riding along the ridge away from the arroyo? Until he discovered the identity of the rider he must remain absolutely in the dark concerning Leviatt's motive in concealing the name of this other actor in the incident. He was positive that Leviatt knew the rider, but he was equally positive that Leviatt would keep this knowledge to himself.

But on this morning he was not much dis-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

turbed over the mystery. Other things were troubling him. Would Miss Radford go riding with him? Would she change her mind over night?

As he rode he consulted his silver time-piece. She had told him not to come before ten. The hands of his watch pointed to ten thirty when he entered the flat, and it was near eleven when he rode up to the cabin door—to find Miss Radford—arrayed in riding skirt, dainty boots, gauntleted gloves, blouse, and soft felt hat—awaiting him at the door.

“You’re late,” she said, smiling as she came out upon the porch.

If he had been less wise he might have told her that she had told him not to come until after ten and that he had noticed that she had been waiting for him in spite of her apparent reluctance of yesterday. But he steered carefully away from this pitfall. He dismounted and threw the bridie rein over Mustard’s head, coming around beside the porch.

“I wasn’t thinkin’ to hurry you, ma’am,”

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

he said. "But I reckon we'll go now. It's cert'nly a fine day for ridin'." He stood silent for a moment, looking about him. Then he flushed. "Why, I'm gettin' right box-headed, ma'am," he declared. "Here I am standin' an' makin' you sick with my palaver, an' your horse waitin' to be caught up."

He stepped quickly to Mustard's side and uncoiled his rope. She stood on the porch, watching him as he proceeded to the corral, caught the pony, and flung a bridle on it. Then he led the animal to the porch and cinched the saddle carefully. Throwing the reins over the pommel of the saddle, he stood at the animal's head, waiting.

She came to the edge of the porch, placed a slender, booted foot into the ox-bow stirrup, and swung gracefully up. In an instant he had vaulted into his own saddle, and together they rode out upon the gray-white floor of the flat.

They rode two miles, keeping near the fringe of cottonwoods, and presently mounted a long slope. Half an hour later

THE TWO-GUN MAN

Miss Radford looked back and saw the flat spread out behind, silent, vast, deserted, slumbering in the swimming white sunlight. A little later she looked again, and the flat was no longer there, for they had reached the crest of the slope and their trail had wound them round to a broad level, from which began another slope, several miles distant.

They had ridden for more than two hours, talking very little, when they reached the crest of the last rise and saw, spreading before them, a level many miles wide, stretching away in three directions. It was a grass plateau, but the grass was dry and drooping and rustled under the ponies' hoofs. There were no trees, but a post oak thicket skirted the southern edge, and it was toward this that he urged his pony. She followed, smiling to think that he was deceiving himself in believing that she had not yet explored this place.

They came close to the thicket, and he swung off his horse and stood at her stirrup.

"I was wantin' you to see the country

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

from here," he said, as he helped her down. She watched him while he picketed the horses, so that they might not stray. Then they went together to the edge of the thicket, seating themselves in a welcome shade.

At their feet the plateau dropped sheer, as though cut with a knife, and a little way out from the base lay a narrow ribbon of water that flowed slowly in its rocky bed, winding around the base of a small hill, spreading over a shallow bottom, and disappearing between the buttes farther down.

Everything beneath them was distinguishable, though distant. Knobs rose here; there a flat spread. Mountains frowned in the distance, but so far away that they seemed like papier-mache shapes towering in a sea of blue. Like a map the country seemed as Miss Radford and Ferguson looked down upon it, yet a big map, over which one might wonder; more vast, more nearly perfect, richer in detail than any that could be evolved from the talents of man.

Ridges, valleys, gullies, hills, knobs, and draws were all laid out in a vast basin. Miss

THE TWO-GUN MAN

Radford's gaze swept down into a section of flat near the river.

"Why, there are some cattle down there!" she exclaimed.

"Sure," he returned; "they're Two Diamond. Way off there behind that ridge is where the wagon is." He pointed to a long range of flat hills that stretched several miles. "The boys that are workin' on the other side of that ridge can't see them cattle like we can. Looks plum re-diculous."

"There are no men with those cattle down there," she said, pointing to those below in the flat.

"No," he returned quietly; "they're all off on the other side of the ridge."

She smiled demurely at him. "Then we won't be interrupted—as we were yesterday," she said.

Did she know that this was why he had selected this spot for the end of the ride? He looked quickly at her, but answered slowly.

"They couldn't see us," he said. "If we was out in the open we'd be right on the

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

skyline. Then anyone could see us. But we've got this thicket behind us, an' I reckon from down there we'd be pretty near invisible."

He turned around, clasping his hands about one knee and looking squarely at her. "I expect you done a heap with your book yesterday—after I went away?"

Her cheeks colored a little under his straight gaze.

"I didn't stay there long," she equivocated. "But I got some very good ideas, and I am glad that I didn't write much. I should have had to destroy it, because I have decided upon a different beginning. Ben made the trip to Dry Bottom yesterday, and last night he told something that had happened there that has given me some very good material for a beginning."

"That's awful interestin'," he observed. "So now you'll be able to start your book with somethin' that really happened?"

"Real and original," she returned, with a quick glance at him. "Ben told me that about a month ago some men had a shooting

THE TWO-GUN MAN

match in Dry Bottom. They used a can for a target, and one man kept it in the air until he put six bullet holes through it. Ben says he is pretty handy with his weapons, but he could never do that. He insists that few men can, and he is inclined to think that the man who did do it must have been a gun-fighter. I suppose you have never tried it?"

Over his lips while she had been speaking had crept the slight mocking smile which always told better than words of the cold cynicism that moved him at times. Did she know anything? Did she suspect him? The smile masked an interest that illumined his eyes very slightly as he looked at her.

"I expect that is plum slick shootin'," he returned slowly. "But some men can do it. I've knowed them. But I ain't heard that it's been done lately in this here country. I reckon Ben told you somethin' of how this man looked?"

He had succeeded in putting the question very casually, and she had not caught the note of deep interest in his voice.

"Why it's very odd," she said, looking him

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

over carefully; "from Ben's description I should assume that the man looked very like you!"

If her reply had startled him he gave little evidence of it. He sat perfectly quiet, gazing with steady eyes out over the big basin. For a time she sat silent also, her gaze following his. Then she turned.

"That would be odd, wouldn't it?" she said.

"What would?" he answered, not looking at her.

"Why, if you *were* the man who had done that shooting! It would follow out the idea of my plot perfectly. For in my story the hero is hired to shoot a supposed rustler, and of course he would have to be a good shot. And since Ben has told me the story of the shooting match I have decided that the hero in my story shall be tested in that manner before being employed to shoot the rustler. Then he comes to the supposed rustler's cabin and meets the heroine, in much the same manner that you came. Now if it should turn out that you were the man

THE TWO-GUN MAN

who did the shooting in Dry Bottom my story up to this point would be very nearly real. And that would be fine!"

She had allowed a little enthusiasm to creep into her voice, and he looked up at her quickly, a queer expression in his eyes.

"You goin' to have your 'two-gun' man bit by a rattler?" he questioned.

"Well, I don't know about that. It would make very little difference. But I should be delighted to find that you were the man who did the shooting over at Dry Bottom. Say that you are!"

Even now he could not tell whether there was subtlety in her voice. The old doubt rose again in his mind. Was she really serious in saying that she intended putting all this in her story, or was this a ruse, concealing an ulterior purpose? Suppose she and her brother suspected him of being the man who had participated in the shooting match in Dry Bottom? Suppose the brother, or she, had invented this tale about the book to draw him out? He was moved to an inward humor, amused to think that

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

either of them should imagine him shallow enough to be caught thus.

But what if they did catch him? Would they gain by it? They could gain nothing, but the knowledge would serve to put them on their guard. But if she did suspect him, what use was there in evasion or denial? He smiled whimsically.

"I reckon your story is goin' to be real up to this point," he returned. "A while back I did shoot at a can in Dry Bottom."

She gave an exclamation of delight. "Now, isn't that marvelous? No one shall be able to say that my beginning will be strictly fiction." She leaned closer to him, her eyes alight with eagerness. "Now please don't say that you are the man who shot the can five times," she pleaded. "I shouldn't want my hero to be beaten at anything he undertook. But I know that you were not beaten. Were you?"

He smiled gravely. "I reckon I wasn't beat," he returned.

She sat back and surveyed him with satisfaction.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"I knew it," she stated, as though in her mind there had never existed any doubt of the fact. "Now," she said, plainly pleased over the result of her questioning, "I shall be able to proceed, entirely confident that my hero will be able to give a good account of himself in any situation."

Her eyes baffled him. He gave up watching her and turned to look at the world beneath him. He would have given much to know her thoughts. She had said that from her brother's description of the man who had won the shooting match at Dry Bottom she would assume that that man had looked very like him. Did her brother hold this opinion also?

Ferguson cared very little if he did. He was accustomed to danger, and he had gone into this business with his eyes open. And if Ben did know—— Unconsciously his lips straightened and his chin went forward slightly, giving his face an expression of hardness that made him look ten years older. Watching him, the girl drew a slow, full breath. It was a side of his character with

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

which she was as yet unacquainted, and she marveled over it, comparing it to the side she already knew—the side that he had shown her—quiet, thoughtful, subtle. And now at a glance she saw him as men knew him—unyielding, unafraid, indomitable.

Yet there was much in this sudden revelation of character to admire. She liked a man whom other men respected for the very traits that his expression had revealed. No man would be likely to adopt an air of superiority toward him; none would attempt to trifle with him. She felt that she ought not to trifle, but moved by some unaccountable impulse, she laughed.

He turned his head at the laugh and looked quizzically at her.

“I hope you were not thinking of killing some one?” she taunted.

His right hand slowly clenched. Something metallic suddenly glinted his eyes, to be succeeded instantly by a slight mockery. “You afraid some one’s goin’ to be killed?” he inquired slowly.

“Well—no,” she returned, startled by the

THE TWO-GUN MAN

question. "But you looked so—so determined that I—I thought——"

He suddenly seized her arm and drew her around so that she faced the little stretch of plain near the ridge about which they had been speaking previously. His lips were in straight lines again, his eyes gleaming interestedly.

"You see that man down there among them cattle?" he questioned.

Following his gaze, she saw a man among perhaps a dozen cattle. At the moment she looked the man had swung a rope, and she saw the loop fall true over the head of a cow the man had selected, saw the pony pivot and drag the cow prone. Then the man dismounted, ran swiftly to the side of the fallen cow, and busied himself about her hind legs.

"What is he doing?" she asked, a sudden excitement shining in her eyes.

"He's hog-tieing her now," returned Ferguson.

She knew what that meant. She had seen Ben throw cattle in this manner when he

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

was branding them. "Hog-tieing" meant binding their hind legs with a short piece of rope to prevent struggling while the brand was being applied.

Apparently this was what the man was preparing to do. Smoke from a nearby fire curled lazily upward, and about this fire the man now worked—evidently turning some branding irons. He gave some little time to this, and while Miss Radford watched she heard Ferguson's voice again.

"I reckon we're goin' to see some fun pretty soon," he said quietly.

"Why?" she inquired quickly.

He smiled. "Do you see that man ridin' through that break on the ridge?" he asked, pointing the place out to her. She nodded, puzzled by his manner. He continued dryly.

"Well, if that man that's comin' through the break is what he ought to be he'll be shootin' pretty soon."

"Why?" she gasped, catching at his sleeve, "why should he shoot?"

He laughed again—grimly. "Well," he returned, "if a puncher ketches a rustler with

THE TWO-GUN MAN

the goods on he's got a heap of right to do some shootin'."

She shuddered. "And do you think that man among the cattle is a rustler?" she asked.

"Wait," he advised, peering intently toward the ridge. "Why," he continued presently, "there's another man ridin' this way. An' he's hidin' from the other—keepin' in the gullies an' the draws so's the first man can't see him if he looks back." He laughed softly. "It's plum re-diculous. Here we are, able to see all that's goin' on down there an' not able to take a hand in it. An' there's them three goin' ahead with what they're thinkin' about, not knowin' that we're watchin' them, an' two of them not knowin' that the third man is watchin'. I'd call that plum re-diculous."

The first man was still riding through the break in the ridge, coming boldly, apparently unconscious of the presence of the man among the cattle, who was well concealed from the first man's eyes by a rocky promontory at the corner of the break. The third

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

man was not over an eighth of a mile behind the first man, and riding slowly and carefully. At the rate the first man was riding not five minutes would elapse before he would come out into the plain full upon the point where the man among the cattle was working at his fire.

Ferguson and Miss Radford watched the scene with interest. Plainly the first man was intruding. Or if not, he was the rustler's confederate and the third man was spying upon him. Miss Radford and Ferguson were to discover the key to the situation presently.

"Do you think that man among the cattle is a rustler?" questioned Miss Radford. In her excitement she had pressed very close to Ferguson and was clutching his arm very tightly.

"I reckon he is," returned Ferguson. "I ain't rememberin' that any ranch has cows that run the range unbranded; especially when the cow has got a calf, unless that cow is a maverick, an' that ain't likely, since she's runnin' with the Two Diamond bunch."

THE TWO-GUN MAN

He leaned forward, for the man had left the fire and was running toward the fallen cow. Once at her side the man bent over her, pressing the hot irons against the bottoms of her hoofs. A thin wreath of smoke curled upward; the cow struggled.

Ferguson looked at Miss Radford. "Burnt her hoofs," he said shortly, "so she can't follow when he runs her calf off."

"The brute!" declared Miss Radford, her face paling with anger.

The man was fumbling with the rope that bound the cow's legs, when the first man rode around the edge of the break and came full upon him. From the distance at which Miss Radford and Ferguson watched they could not see the expression of either man's face, but they saw the rustler's right hand move downward; saw his pistol glitter in the sunlight.

But the pistol was not raised. The first man's pistol had appeared just a fraction of a second sooner, and they saw that it was poised, menacing the rustler.

For an instant the two men were motion-

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

less. Ferguson felt the grasp on his arm tighten, and he turned his head to see Miss Radford's face, pale and drawn; her eyes lifted to his with a slow, dawning horror in them.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "They are going to shoot!" She withdrew her hand from Ferguson's arm and held it, with the other, to her ears, cringing away from the edge of the cliff. She waited, breathless, for—it seemed to her—the space of several minutes, her head turned from the men, her eyes closed for fear that she might, in the dread of the moment, look toward the plain. She kept telling herself that she would not turn, but presently, in spite of her determination, the suspense was too great, and she turned quickly and fearfully, expecting to see at least one riderless horse. That would have been horrible enough.

To her surprise both men still kept the positions that they had held when she had turned away. The newcomer's revolver still menaced the rustler. She looked up into Ferguson's face, to see a grim smile on it, to

THE TWO-GUN MAN

see his eyes, chilled and narrowed, fixed steadily upon the two horsemen.

"Oh!" she said, "is it over?"

Ferguson heard the question, and smiled mirthlessly without turning his head.

"I reckon it ain't over—yet," he returned. "But I expect it'll be over pretty soon, if that guy that's got his gun on the rustler don't get a move on right quick. That other guy is comin' around the corner of that break, an' if he's the rustler's friend that man with the gun will get his pretty rapid." His voice raised a trifle, a slightly anxious note in it.

"Why don't the damn fool turn around? He could see that last man now if he did. Now, what do you think of that?" Ferguson's voice was sharp and tense, and, in spite of herself, Miss Radford's gaze shifted again to the plains below her. Fascinated, her fear succumbing to the intense interest of the moment, she followed the movements of the trio.

From around the corner of the break the third man had ridden. He was not over a

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

hundred feet from the man who had caught the rustler and he was walking his horse now. The watchers on the edge of the plateau could see that he had taken in the situation and was stealing upon the captor, who sat in his saddle, his back to the advancing rider.

Drawing a little closer, the third man stealthily dropped from his pony and crept forward. The significance of this movement dawned upon Miss Radford in a flash, and she again seized Ferguson's arm, tugging at it fiercely.

"Why, he's going to kill that man!" she cried. "Can't you do something? For mercy's sake do! Shout, or shoot off your pistol—do something to warn him!"

Ferguson flashed a swift glance at her, and she saw that his face wore a queer pallor. His expression had grown grimmer, but he smiled—a little sadly, she thought.

"It ain't a bit of use tryin' to do anything," he returned, his gaze again on the men. "We're two miles from them men an' a thousand feet above them. There ain't any

THE TWO-GUN MAN

pistol report goin' to stop what's goin' on down there. All we can do is to watch. Mebbe we can recognize one of them. . . . Shucks!"

The exclamation was called from him by a sudden movement on the part of the captor. The third man must have made a noise, for the captor turned sharply. At the instant he did so the rustler's pistol flashed in the sunlight.

The watchers on the plateau did not hear the report at once, and when they did it came to them only faintly—a slight sound which was barely distinguishable. But they saw a sudden spurt of flame and smoke. The captor reeled drunkenly in his saddle, caught blindly at the pommel, and then slid slowly down into the grass of the plains.

Ferguson drew a deep breath and, turning, looked sharply at Miss Radford. She had covered her face with her hands and was swaying dizzily. He was up from the rock in a flash and was supporting her, leading her away from the edge of the plateau. She went unresisting, her slender figure shudder-

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

ing spasmodically, her hands still covering her face.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, as the horror of the scene rose in her mind. "The brutes! The brutes!"

Feeling that if he kept quiet she would recover from the shock of the incident sooner, Ferguson said nothing in reply to her outbreaks as he led her toward the ponies. For a moment after reaching them she leaned against her animal's shoulder, her face concealed from Ferguson by the pony's mane. Then he was at her side, speaking firmly.

"You must get away from here," he said, "I ought to have got you away before—before that happened."

She looked up, showing him a pair of wide, dry eyes, in which there was still a trace of horror. An expression of grave self-accusation shone in his.

"You were not to blame," she said dully. "You may have anticipated a meeting of those men, but you could not have foreseen the end. Oh!" She shuddered again. "To

THE TWO-GUN MAN

think of seeing a man deliberately murdered!"

"That's just what it was," he returned quietly; "just plain murder. They had him between them. He didn't have a chance. He was bound to get it from one or the other. Looks like they trapped him; run him down there on purpose." He held her stirrup.

"I reckon you've seen enough, ma'am," he added. "You'd better hop right on your horse an' get back to Bear Flat."

She shivered and raised her head, looking at him—a flash of fear in her eyes. "You are going down there!" she cried, her eyes dilating.

He laughed grimly. "I cert'nly am, ma'am," he returned. "You'd better go right off. I'm ridin' down there to see how bad that man is hit."

She started toward him, protesting. "Why, they will kill you, too!" she declared.

He laughed again, with a sudden grim humor. "There ain't any danger," he returned. "They've sloped."

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

Involuntarily she looked down. Far out on the plains, through the break in the ridge of hills, she could see two horsemen racing away.

"The cowards!" she cried, her voice shaking with anger. "To shoot a man in cold blood and then run!" She looked at Ferguson, her figure stiffening with decision.

"If you go down there I am going, too!" she declared. "He might need some help," she added, seeing the objection in his eyes, "and if he does I may be able to give it to him. You know," she continued, smiling wanly, "I have had some experience with sick people."

He said nothing more, but silently assisted her into the saddle and swung into his own. They urged the animals to a rapid pace, she following him eagerly.

It was a rough trail, leading through many gullies, around miniature hills, into bottoms where huge boulders and treacherous sand barred the way, along the face of dizzy cliffs, and through lava beds where the footing was uncertain and dangerous. But

THE TWO-GUN MAN

in an hour they were on the plains and riding toward the break in the ridge of hills, where the shooting had been done.

The man's pony had moved off a little and was grazing unconcernedly when they arrived. A brown heap in the grass told where the man lay, and presently Ferguson was down beside him, one of his limp wrists between his fingers. He stood up after a moment, to confront Miss Radford, who had fallen behind during the last few minutes of the ride. Ferguson's face was grave, and there was a light in his eyes that thrilled her for a moment as she looked at him.

"He ain't dead, ma'am," he said as he assisted her down from her pony. "The bullet got him in the shoulder."

She caught a queer note in his voice—something approaching appeal. She looked swiftly at him, suspicious. "Do you know him?" she asked.

"I reckon I do, ma'am," he returned. "It's Rope Jones. Once he stood by me when he thought I needed a friend. If there's any chance I'm goin' to get him to

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

your cabin—where you can take care of him till he gets over this—if he ever does.”

She realized now how this tragedy had shocked her. She reeled and the world swam dizzily before her. Again she saw Ferguson dart forward, but she steadied herself and smiled reassuringly.

“It is merely the thought that I must now put my little knowledge to a severe test,” she said. “It rather frightened me. I don’t know whether anything can be done.”

She succeeded in forcing herself to calmness and gave orders rapidly.

“Get something under his head,” she commanded. “No, that will be too high,” she added, as she saw Ferguson start to unbuckle the saddle cinch on his pony. “Raise his head only a very little. That round thing that you have fastened to your saddle (the slicker) would do very well. There. Now get some water!”

She was down beside the wounded man in another instant, cutting away a section of the shirt near the shoulder, with a knife that she had borrowed from Ferguson. The

THE TWO-GUN MAN

wound had not bled much and was lower than Ferguson had thought. But she gave it what care she could, and when Ferguson arrived with water—from the river, a mile away—she dressed the wound and applied water to Rope's forehead.

Soon she saw that her efforts were to be of little avail. Rope lay pitifully slack and unresponsive. At the end of an hour's work Ferguson bent over her with a question on his lips.

"Do you reckon he'll come around, ma'am?"

She shook her head negatively. "The bullet has lodged somewhere—possibly in the lung," she returned. "It entered just above the heart, and he has bled much—internally. He may never regain consciousness."

Ferguson's face paled with a sudden anger. "In that case, ma'am, we'll never know who shot him," he said slowly. "An' I'm wantin' to know that. Couldn't you fetch him to, ma'am—just long enough so's I could ask him?"

She looked up with a slow glance. "I

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

can try," she said. "Is there any more whiskey in your flask?"

He produced the flask, and they both bent over Rope, forcing a generous portion of the liquor down his throat. Then, alternately bathing the wound and his forehead, they watched. They were rewarded presently by a faint flicker of the eyelids and a slow flow of color in the pale cheeks. Then after a little the eyes opened.

In an instant Ferguson's lips were close to Rope's ear. "Who shot you, Rope, old man?" he asked eagerly. "You don't need to be afraid to tell me, it's Ferguson."

The wounded man's eyes were glazed with a dull incomprehension. But slowly, as though at last he was faintly conscious of the significance of the question, his eyes glinted with the steady light of returning reason. Suddenly he smiled, his lips opening slightly. Both watchers leaned tensely forward to catch the low words.

"Ferguson told me to look out," he mumbled. "He told me to be careful that they didn't get me between them. But I

THE TWO-GUN MAN

wasn't thinkin' it would happen just that way." And now his eyes opened scornfully and he struggled and lifted himself upon one arm, gazing at some imaginary object.

"Why," he said slowly and distinctly, his voice cold and metallic, "you're a hell of a range boss! Why you——!" he broke off suddenly, his eyes fixed full upon Miss Radford. "Why, it's a woman! An' I thought—— Why, ma'am," he went on, apologetically, "I didn't know you was there! . . . But you ain't goin' to run off no calf while I'm lookin' at you. Shucks! Won't the Ol' Man be some surprised to know that Tucson an'——"

He shuddered spasmodically and sat erect with a great effort.

"You've got me, damn you!" he sneered. "But you won't never get anyone——"

He swung his right hand over his head, as though the hand held a pistol. But the arm suddenly dropped, he shuddered again, and sank slowly back—his eyes wide and staring, but unseeing.

Ferguson looked sharply at Miss Rad-

EDGE OF THE PLATEAU

ford, who was suddenly bending over the prostrate man, her head on his breast. She arose after a little, tears starting to her eyes.

“He has gone,” she said slowly.

CHAPTER XV

A FREE HAND

IT was near midnight when Ferguson rode in to the Two Diamond ranch-house leading Rope's pony. He carefully unsaddled the two animals and let them into the corral, taking great pains to make little noise. Rope's saddle—a peculiar one with a high pommel bearing a silver plate upon which the puncher's name was engraved—he placed conspicuously near the door of the bunkhouse. His own he carefully suspended from its accustomed hook in the lean-to. Then, still carefully, he made his way inside the bunkhouse and sought his bunk.

At dawn he heard voices outside and he arose and went to the door. Several of the men were gathered about the step talking.

A FREE HAND

For an instant Ferguson stood, his eyes roving over the group. Tucson was not there. He went back into the bunkhouse and walked casually about, taking swift glances at the bunks where the men still slept. Then he returned to the door, satisfied that Tucson had not come in.

When he reached the door again he found that the men of the group had discovered the saddle. One of them was saying something about it. "That ain't just the way I take care of my saddle," he was telling the others; "leavin' her out nights."

"I never knowed Rope to be that careless before," said another.

Ferguson returned to the bunkhouse and ate breakfast. After the meal was finished he went out, caught up Mustard, swung into the saddle, and rode down to the ranchhouse door. He found Stafford in the office. The latter greeted the stray-man with a smile.

"Somethin' doin'?" he questioned.

"You might call it that," returned Ferguson. He went inside and seated himself near Stafford's desk.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"I've come in to tell you that I saw some rustlers workin' on the herd yesterday," he said.

Stafford sat suddenly erect, his eyes lighting interrogatively.

"It wasn't Ben Radford," continued Ferguson, answering the look. "You'd be surprised if I told you. But I ain't tellin'—now. I'm waitin' to see if someone else does. But I'm tellin' you this: They got Rope Jones."

Stafford's face reddened with anger. "They got Rope, you say?" he demanded. "Why, where—damn them!"

"Back of the ridge about fifteen miles up the crick," returned Ferguson. "I was ridin' along the edge of the plateau an' I saw a man down there shoot another. I got down as soon as I could an' found Rope. There wasn't nothin' I could do. So I planted him where I found him an' brought his horse back. There was two rustlers there. But only one done the shootin'. I got the name of one."

Stafford cursed. "I'm wantin' to know

A FREE HAND

who it was!" he demanded. "I'll make him—why, damn him, I'll——"

"You're carryin' on awful," observed Ferguson dryly. "But you ain't doin' any good." He leaned closer to Stafford. "I'm quittin' my job right now," he said.

Stafford leaned back in his chair, surprised into silence. For an instant he glared at the stray-man, and then his lips curled scornfully.

"So you're quittin'," he sneered; "scared plum out because you seen a man put out of business! I reckon Leviatt wasn't far wrong when he said——"

"I wouldn't say a lot," interrupted Ferguson coldly. "I ain't admittin' that I'm any scared. An' I ain't carin' a heap because Leviatt's been gassin' to you. But I'm quittin' the job you give me. Ben Radford ain't the man who's been rustlin' your cattle. It's someone else. I'm askin' you to hire me to find out whoever it is. I'm wantin' a free hand. I don't want anyone askin' me any questions. I don't want anyone orderin' me around. But if you want the

THE TWO-GUN MAN

men who are rustlin' your cattle, I'm offerin' to do the job. Do I get it?"

"You're keepin' right on—workin' for the Two Diamond," returned Stafford. "But I'd like to get hold of the man who got Rope."

Ferguson smiled grimly. "That man'll be gittin' his some day," he declared, rising. "I'm keepin' him for myself. Mebbe I won't shoot him. I reckon Rope'd be some tickled if he'd know that the man who shot him could get a chance to think it over while some man was stringin' him up. You ain't sayin' anything about anything."

He turned and went out. Five minutes later Stafford saw him riding slowly toward the river.

As the days went a mysterious word began to be spoken wherever men congregated. No man knew whence the word had come, but it was whispered that Rope Jones would be seen no more. His pony joined the remuda; his saddle and other personal effects became prizes for which the men of

A FREE HAND

the outfit cast lots. Inquiries were made concerning the puncher by friends who persisted in being inquisitive, but nothing resulted. In time the word "rustler" became associated with his name, and "caught with the goods" grew to be a phrase that told eloquently of the manner of his death. Later it was whispered that Leviatt and Tucson had come upon Rope behind the ridge, catching him in the act of running off a Two Diamond calf. But as no report had been made to Stafford by either Leviatt or Tucson, the news remained merely rumor.

Ferguson had said nothing more to any man concerning the incident. To do so would have warned Tucson. And neither Ferguson nor Miss Radford could have sworn to the man's guilt. In addition to this, there lingered in Ferguson's mind a desire to play this game in his own way. Telling the men of the outfit what he had seen would make his knowledge common property—and in the absence of proof might cause him to appear ridiculous.

But since the shooting he had little doubt

THE TWO-GUN MAN

that Leviatt had been Tucson's companion on that day. Rope's scathing words—spoken while Miss Radford had been trying to revive him—. “You're a hell of a range boss,” had convinced the stray-man that Leviatt had been one of the assailants. He had wondered much over the emotions of the two when they returned to the spot where the murder had been committed, to find their victim buried and his horse gone. But of one thing he was certain—their surprise over the discovery that the body of their victim had been buried could not have equalled their discomfiture on learning that the latter's pony had been secretly brought to the home ranch, and that among the men of the outfit was one, at least, who knew something of their guilty secret. Ferguson thought this to be the reason that they had not reported the incident to Stafford.

There was now nothing for the stray-man to do but watch. The men who had killed Rope were wary and dangerous, and their next move might be directed at him. But he was not disturbed. One thought brought

A FREE HAND

him a mighty satisfaction. He was no longer employed to fasten upon Ben Radford the stigma of guilt; no longer need he feel oppressed with the guilty consciousness, when in the presence of Mary Radford, that he was, in a measure, a hired spy whose business it was to convict her brother of the crime of rustling. He might now meet the young woman face to face, without experiencing the sensation of guilt that had always affected him.

Beneath his satisfaction lurked a deeper emotion. During the course of his acquaintance with Rope Jones he had developed a sincere affection for the man. The grief in his heart over Rope's death was made more poignant because of the latter's words, just before the final moment, which seemed to have been a plea for vengeance:

"Ferguson told me to look out. He told me to be careful that they didn't get me between them. But I wasn't thinkin' that it would happen just that way."

This had been all that Rope had said about his friend, but it showed that during

THE TWO-GUN MAN

his last conscious moments he had been thinking of the stray-man. As the days passed the words dwelt continually in Ferguson's mind. Each day that he rode abroad, searching for evidence against the murderers, brought him a day nearer to the vengeance upon which he had determined.

CHAPTER XVI

LEVIATT TAKES A STEP

MISS RADFORD was sitting on the flat rock on the hill where she had written the first page of her novel. The afternoon sun was coming slantwise over the western mountains, sinking steadily toward the rift out of which came the rose veil that she had watched many times. She had just completed a paragraph in which the villain appears when she became aware of someone standing near. She turned swiftly, with heightened color, to see Leviatt.

His sudden appearance gave her something of a shock, for as he stood there, smiling at her, he answered perfectly the description she had just written. He might have

THE TWO-GUN MAN

just stepped from one of her pages. But the shock passed, leaving her a little pale, but quite composed—and not a little annoyed. She had found her work interesting; she had become quite absorbed in it. Therefore she failed to appreciate Leviatt's sudden appearance, and with uptilted chin turned from him and pretended an interest in the rim of hills that surrounded the flat.

For an instant Leviatt stood, a frown wrinkling his forehead. Then with a smile he stepped forward and seated himself beside her on the rock. She immediately drew her skirts close to her and shot a displeased glance at him from the corners of her eyes. Then seeing that he still sat there, she moved her belongings a few feet and followed them. He could not doubt the significance of this move, but had he been wise he might have ignored it. A woman's impulses will move her to rebuke a man, but if he will accept without comment he may be reasonably sure of her pity, and pity is a path of promise.

But the range boss neglected his oppor-

LEVIATT TAKES A STEP

tunity. He made the mistake of thinking that because he had seen her many times while visiting her brother he might now with propriety assume an air of intimacy toward her.

"I reckon this rock is plenty big enough for both of us," he said amiably.

She measured the distance between them with a calculating eye. "It is," she returned quietly, "if you remain exactly where you are."

He forced a smile. "An' if I don't?" he inquired.

"You may have the rock to yourself," she returned coldly. "I did not ask you to come here."

He chose to ignore this hint, telling her that he had been to the cabin to see Ben and, finding him absent, had ridden through the flat. "I saw you when I was quite a piece away," he concluded, "an' thought mebbe you might be lonesome."

"When I am lonesome I choose my own company," she returned coldly.

"Why, sure," he said, his tone slightly

THE TWO-GUN MAN

sarcastic; "you cert'nly ought to know who you want to talk to. But you ain't objectin' to me settin' on this hill?" he inquired.

"The hill is not mine," she observed quietly, examining one of the written pages of her novel; "sit here as long as you like."

"Thanks." He drawled the word. Leaning back on one elbow he stretched out as though assured that she would make no further objections to his presence. She ignored him completely and very deliberately arranged her papers and resumed writing.

For a time he lay silent, watching the pencil travel the width of the page—and then back. A mass of completed manuscript lay at her side, the pages covered with carefully written, legible words. She had always taken a pardonable pride in her penmanship. For a while he watched her, puzzled, furtively trying to decipher some of the words that appeared upon the pages. But the distance was too great for him and he finally gave it up and fell to looking at her instead, though determined to solve the wordy mystery that was massed near her.

LEVIATT TAKES A STEP

Finally finding the silence irksome, he dropped an experimental word, speaking casually. "You must have been to school a heap—writin' like you do."

She gave him no answer, being at that moment absorbed in a thought which she was trying to transcribe before it should take wings and be gone forever.

"Writin' comes easy to some people," he persisted.

The thought had been set down; she turned very slightly. "Yes," she said looking steadily at him, "it does. So does impertinence."

He smiled easily. "I ain't aimin' to be impertinent," he returned. "I wouldn't reckon that askin' you what you are writin' would be impertinent. It's too long for a letter."

"It is a novel," she returned shortly.

He smiled, exulting over this partial concession. "I reckon to write a book you must be some special kind of a woman," he observed admiringly.

She was silent. He sat up and leaned to-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

ward her, his eyes flashing with a sudden passion.

"If that's it," he said with unmistakable significance, "I don't mind tellin' you that I'm some partial to them special kind."

Her chin rose a little. "I am not concerned over your feelings," she returned without looking at him.

"That kind of a woman would naturally know a heap," he went on, apparently unmindful of the rebuke; "they'd cert'nly know enough to be able to see when a man likes them."

She evidently understood the drift, for her eyes glowed subtly. "It is too bad that you are not a 'special kind of man,' then," she replied.

"Meanin'?" he questioned, his eyes glinting with eagerness.

"Meaning that if you were a 'special kind of man' you would be able to tell when a woman doesn't like you," she said coldly.

"I reckon that I ain't a special kind then," he declared, his face reddening slightly. "Of course, I've seen that you ain't appeared to

LEVIATT TAKES A STEP

take much of a shine to me. But I've heard that there's women that can be won if a man keeps at it long enough."

"Some men like to waste their time," she returned quietly.

"I don't call it wastin' time to be talkin' to you," he declared rapidly.

"Our opinions differ," she observed shortly, resting the pencil point on the page that she had been writing.

Her profile was toward him; her cheeks were tinged with color; some stray wisps of hair hung, breeze-blown, over her forehead and temples. She made an attractive picture, sitting there with the soft sunlight about her, a picture whose beauty smote Leviatt's heart with a pang of sudden regret and disappointment. She might have been his, but for the coming of Ferguson. And now, because of the stray-man's wiles, he was losing her.

A sudden rage seized upon him; he leaned forward, his face bloating poisonously. "Mebbe I could name a man who ain't wastin' his time!" he sneered.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

She turned suddenly and looked at him, dropping pencil and paper, her eyes flashing with a bitter scorn. "You are one of those sulking cowards who fawn over men and insult defenseless women!" she declared, the words coming slowly and distinctly.

He had realized before she answered that he had erred, and he smiled deprecatingly, the effort contorting his face.

"I wasn't meanin' just that," he said weakly. "I reckon it's a clear field an' no favors." He took a step toward her, his voice growing tense. "I've been comin' down to your cabin a lot, sayin' that I was comin' to see Ben. But I didn't come to see Ben—I wanted to look at you. I reckon you knowed that. A woman can't help but see when a man's in love with her. But you've never give me a chance to tell you. I'm tellin' you now. I want you to marry me. I'm range boss for the Two Diamond an' I've got some stock that's my own, an' money in the bank over in Cimarron. I'll put up a shack a few miles down the river an'——!"

LEVIATT TAKES A STEP

"Stop!" commanded Miss Radford imperiously.

Leviatt had been speaking rapidly, absorbed in his subject, assurance shining in his face. But at Miss Radford's command he broke off suddenly and stiffened, surprise widening his eyes.

"You have said enough," she continued; "quite enough. I have never thought of you as a possible admirer. I certainly have done nothing that might lead you to believe I would marry you. I do not even like you—not even respect you. I am not certain that I shall ever marry, but if I do, I certainly shall not marry a man whose every look is an insult."

She turned haughtily and began to gather up her papers. There had been no excitement in her manner; her voice had been steady, even, and tempered with a slight scorn.

For a brief space Leviatt stood, while the full significance of her refusal ate slowly into his consciousness. Whatever hopes he might have had had been swept away in

THE TWO-GUN MAN

those few short, pithy sentences. His passion checked, the structure erected by his imagination toppled to ruin, his vanity hurt, he stood before her stripped of the veneer that had made him seem, heretofore, nearly the man he professed to be.

In her note book had been written: "Dave Leviatt. . . . One rather gets the impression that the stoop is a reflection of the man's nature, which seems vindictive and suggests a low cunning. His eyes are small, deep set, and glitter when he talks. But they are steady and cold—almost merciless. One's thoughts go instantly to the tiger. I shall try to create that impression in the reader's mind."

And now as she looked at him she was sure that task would not be difficult. She had now an impression of him that seemed as though it had been seared into her mind. The eyes that she had thought merciless were now glittering malevolently, and she shuddered at the satyric upward curve of his lips as he stepped close to the rock and placed a hand upon the mass of manuscript lying

LEVIATT TAKES A STEP

there, that she had previously dropped, to prevent her leaving.

"So you don't love me?" he sneered. "You don't even respect me. Why? Because you've taken a shine to that damned maverick that come here from Dry Bottom—Stafford's new stray-man!"

"That is my business," she returned icily.

"It sure is," he said, the words writhing venomously through his lips. "An' it's my business too. There ain't any damned——"

He had glanced suddenly downward while he had been talking and his gaze rested upon an upturned page of the manuscript that lay beside him on the rock. He broke off speaking and reaching down took up the page, his eyes narrowing with interest. The page he had taken up was one from the first chapter and described in detail the shooting match in Dry Bottom. It was a truthful picture of what had actually happened. She had even used the real names of the characters. Leviatt saw a reference to the "Silver Dollar" saloon, to the loungers, to the stranger who had ridden up and who sat

THE TWO-GUN MAN

on his pony near the hitching rail, and who was called Ferguson. He saw his own name; read the story of how the stranger had eclipsed his feat by putting six bullets into the can.

He dropped the page to the rock and looked up at Miss Radford with a short laugh.

"So that's what you're writin'?" he sneered. "You're writin' somethin' that really happened. You're even writin' the real names an' tellin' how Stafford's stray-man butted in an' beat me shootin'. You knowin' this shows that him an' you has been travelin' pretty close together."

For an instant Miss Radford forgot her anger. Her eyes snapped with a sudden interest.

"Were you the man who hit the can five times?" she questioned, unable to conceal her eagerness.

She saw a flush slowly mount to his face. Evidently he had said more than he had intended.

"Well, if I am?" he returned, his lips

LEVIATT TAKES A STEP

writhing in a sneer. "Him beatin' me shoot-in' that way don't prove nothin'."

She was now becoming convinced of her cleverness. From Ben's description of the man who had won the shooting match she had been able to lead Ferguson to the admission that he had been the central character in that incident, and now it had transpired that Leviatt was the man he had beaten. This had been the way she had written it in the story. So far the plot that had been born of her imagination had proved to be the story of a real occurrence.

She had counted upon none but imaginary characters,—though she had determined to clothe these with reality through study—but now, she had discovered, she had been the chronicler of a real incident, and two of her characters had been pitted against each other in a contest in which there had been enough bitterness to provide the animus necessary to carry them through succeeding pages, ready and willing to fly at each other's throats. She was not able to conceal her satisfaction over the discovery, and when

THE TWO-GUN MAN

she looked at Leviatt again she smiled broadly.

"That confession explains a great many things," she said, stooping to recover the page that he had dropped beside her upon the rock.

"Meanin' what?" he questioned, his eyes glittering evilly.

"Meaning that I now know why you are not friendly toward Mr. Ferguson," she returned. "I heard that he beat you in the shooting match," she went on tauntingly, "and then when you insulted him afterwards, he talked very plainly to you."

The moment she had spoken she realized that her words had hurt him, for he paled and his eyes narrowed venomously. But his voice was cold and steady.

"Was Mr. Ferguson tellin' you that?" he inquired, succeeding in placing ironic emphasis upon the prefix.

She was arranging the contents of her hand bag and she did not look up as she answered him.

"That is my business," she returned quiet-

LEVIATT TAKES A STEP

ly. "But I don't mind telling you that the man who told me about the occurrence would not lie about it."

"It's nice that you've got such a heap of faith in him," he sneered.

It was plain to her that he thought Ferguson had told her about the shooting match, and it was equally plain that he still harbored evil thoughts against the stray-man. And also, he suspected that something more than mere friendship existed between her and Ferguson. She had long hoped that one day she might be given the opportunity of meeting in person a man whose soul was consumed with jealousy, in order that she might be able to gain some impressions of the intensity of his passion. This seemed to be her opportunity. Therefore she raised her chin a little and looked at him with a tantalizing smile.

"Of course I have faith in him," she declared, with a slight, biting emphasis. "I believe in him—absolutely."

She saw his lips twitch. "Sure," he sneered, "you was just beginnin' to believe

THE TWO-GUN MAN

in him that day when you was holdin' hands with him—just about here. I reckon he was enjoyin' himself."

She started, but smiled immediately. "So you saw that?" she inquired, knowing that he had, but taking a keen delight in seeing that he still remembered. But this conversation was becoming too personal; she had no desire to argue this point with him, even to get an impression of the depth of his passion, so she gathered up her belongings and prepared to depart. But he stepped deliberately in front of her, barring the way of escape. His face was aflame with passion.

"I seen him holdin' your hand," he said, his voice trembling; "I seen that he was holdin' it longer than he had any right. An' I seen you pull your hand away when you thought I was lookin' at you. I reckon you've taken a shine to him; he's the kind that the women like—with his slick ways an' smooth palaver—an' his love makin'." He laughed with his lips only, his eyes narrowed to glittering pin points. She had not

LEVIATT TAKES A STEP

thought that jealousy could make a person half so repulsive.

"If you're lovin' him," he continued, leaning toward her, his muscles tense, his lips quivering with a passion that he was no longer able to repress, "I'm tellin' you that you're wastin' your time. You wouldn't think so much of him if you knowed that he come here——"

Leviatt had become aware that Miss Radford was not listening; that she was no longer looking at him, but at something behind him. At the instant he became aware of this he turned sharply in his tracks, his right hand falling swiftly to his holster. Not over half a dozen paces distant stood Ben Radford, gravely watching.

"Mebbe you folks are rehearsing a scene from that story," he observed quietly. "I wasn't intending to interrupt, but I heard loud talking and I thought mebbe it wasn't anything private. So I just got off my horse and climbed up here, to satisfy my curiosity."

Leviatt's hand fell away from the holster,

THE TWO-GUN MAN

a guilty grin overspreading his face. "I reckon we wasn't rehearsin' any scene," he said, trying to make the words come easily. "I was just tellin' your sister that——"

Miss Radford laughed banteringly. "You have spoiled a chapter in my book, Ben," she declared with pretended annoyance; "Mr. Leviatt had just finished proposing to me and was at the point where he was supposed to speak bitter words about his rival." She laughed again, gazing at Leviatt with mocking eyes. "Of course, I shall never be able to tell my readers what he might have said, for you appeared at a most inopportune time. But he has taught me a great deal—much more, in fact, than I ever expected from him."

She bowed mockingly. "I am very, very much obliged to you, Mr. Leviatt," she said, placing broad emphasis upon her words. "I promise to try and make a very interesting character of you—there were times when you were most dramatic."

She bowed to Leviatt and flashed a dazzling smile at her brother. Then she walked

LEVIATT TAKES A STEP

past Leviatt, picked her way daintily over the loose stones on the hillside, and descended to the level where she had tethered her pony. Ben stood grinning admiringly after her as she mounted and rode out into the flat. Then he turned to Leviatt, soberly contemplating him.

"I don't think you were rehearsing for the book," he said quietly, an undercurrent of humor in his voice.

"She was funnin' me," returned Leviatt, his face reddening.

"I reckon she was," returned Ben dryly. "She's certainly some clever at handing it to a man." He smiled down into the flat, where Miss Radford could still be seen, riding toward the cabin. "Looks as though she wasn't quite ready to change her name to 'Leviatt'," he grinned.

But there was no humor in Leviatt's reflections. He stood for a moment, looking down into the flat, the expression of his face morose and sullen. Ben's bantering words only added fuel to the flame of rage and disappointment that was burning fiercely in his

THE TWO-GUN MAN

heart. Presently the hard lines of his lips disappeared and he smiled craftily.

"She's about ready to change her name," he said. "Only she ain't figgerin' that it's goin' to be Leviatt."

"You're guessing now," returned Ben sharply.

Leviatt laughed oddly. "I reckon I ain't doin' any guessin'," he returned. "You've been around her a heap an' been seein' her consid'able, but you ain't been usin' your eyes."

"Meaning what?" demanded Ben, an acid-like coldness in his voice.

"Meanin' that if you'd been usin' your eyes you'd have seen that she's some took up with Stafford's new stray-man."

"Well," returned Ben, "she's her own boss. If she's made friends with Ferguson that's her business." He laughed. "She's certainly clever," he added, "and mebbe she's got her own notion as to why she's made friends with him. She's told me that she's goin' to make him a character in the book she's writing. Likely she's stringing him."

LEVIATT TAKES A STEP

"I reckon she ain't stringin' him," declared Leviatt. "A girl ain't doin' much stringin' when she's holdin' a man's hand an' blushin' when somebody ketches her at it."

There was a slight sneer in Leviatt's voice which drew a sharp glance from Radford. For an instant his face clouded and he was about to make a sharp reply. But his face cleared immediately and he smiled.

"I'm banking on her being able to take care of herself," he returned. "Her holding Ferguson's hand proves nothing. Likely she was trying to get an impression—she's always telling me that. But she's running her own game, and if she is stringing Ferguson that's her business, and if she thinks a good bit of him that's her business, too. If a man ain't jealous, he might be able to see that Ferguson ain't a half bad sort of a man."

An evil light leaped into Leviatt's eyes. He turned and faced Radford, words coming from his lips coldly and incisively. "When you interrupted me," he said, "I was goin' to tell your sister about Ferguson."

THE TWO-GUN MAN

Mebbe if I tell you what I was goin' to tell her it'll make you see things some different. A while ago Stafford was wantin' to hire a gunfighter." He shot a significant glance at Radford, who returned it steadily. "I reckon you know what he wanted a gunfighter for. He got one. His name's Ferguson. He's gettin' a hundred dollars a month for the season, to put Ben Radford out of business!"

The smile had gone from Radford's face; his lips were tightly closed, his eyes cold and alert.

"You lying about Ferguson because you think he's friendly with Mary?" he questioned quietly.

Leviatt's right hand dropped swiftly to his holster. But Radford laughed harshly. "Quit it!" he said sharply. "I ain't sayin' you're a liar, but what you've said makes you liable to be called that until you've proved you ain't. How do you know Ferguson's been hired to put me out of business?"

Leviatt laughed. "Stafford an' me went

LEVIATT TAKES A STEP

to Dry Bottom to get a gunfighter. I shot a can in the street in front of the Silver Dollar so's Stafford would be able to get a line on anyone tryin' to beat my game. Ferguson done it an' Stafford hired him."

Radford's gaze was level and steady. "Then you've knowed right along that he was lookin' for me," he said coldly. "Why didn't you say something about it before. You've been claiming to be my friend."

Leviatt flushed, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other, but watching Radford with alert and suspicious glances. "Why," he returned shortly, "I'm range boss for the Two Diamond an' I ain't hired to tell what I know. I reckon you'd think I was a hell of a man to be tellin' things that I ain't got no right to tell."

"But you're telling it now," returned Radford, his eyes narrowing a little.

"Yes," returned Leviatt quietly, "I am. An' you're callin' me a liar for it. But I'm tellin' you to wait. Mebbe you'll tumble. I reckon you ain't heard how Ferguson's been tellin' the boys that he went down to your

THE TWO-GUN MAN

cabin one night claimin' to have been bit by a rattler, because he wanted to get acquainted with you an' pot you some day when you wasn't expectin' it. An' then after he'd stayed all night in your cabin he was braggin' to the boys that he reckoned on makin' a fool of your sister. Oh, he's some slick!" he concluded, a note of triumph in his voice.

Radford started, his face paling a little. He had thought it strange that an experienced plainsman—as Ferguson appeared to be—should have been bitten by a rattler in the manner he had described. And then he had been hanging around the——

"Mebbe you might think it's onusual for Stafford to hire a two-gun man to look after strays," broke in Leviatt at this point. "Two-gun men ain't takin' such jobs regular," he insinuated. "Stray-men is usual low-down, mean, ornery cusses which ain't much good for anything else, an' so they spend their time mopin' around, doin' work that ain't fit for any puncher to do."

Radford had snapped himself erect, his

LEVIATT TAKES A STEP

lips straightening. He suddenly held out a hand to Leviatt. "I'm thanking you," he said steadily. "It's rather late for you to be telling me, but I think it's come in time anyway. I'm watching him for a little while, and if things are as you say——" He broke off, his voice filled with a significant grimness. "So-long," he added.

He turned and descended the slope of the hill. An instant later Leviatt saw him loping his pony toward the cabin. For a few minutes Leviatt gazed after him, his eyes alight with satisfaction. Then he, too, descended the slope of the hill and mounted his pony.

CHAPTER XVII

A BREAK IN THE STORY

MARY RADFORD had found the day too beautiful to remain indoors and so directly after dinner she had caught up her pony and was off for a ride through the cottonwood. She had been compelled to catch up the pony herself, for of late Ben had been neglectful of this duty. Until the last week or so he had always caught her pony and placed the saddle on it before leaving in the morning, assuring her that if she did not ride during his absence the pony would not suffer through being saddled and bridled. But within the last week she thought she detected a change in Ben's manner. He seemed preoccupied and glum, falling suddenly into a taciturnity

A BREAK IN THE STORY

broken only by brief periods during which he condescended to reply to her questions with—it seemed—grudging monosyllables.

Several times, too, she had caught him watching her with furtive glances in which, she imagined, she detected a glint of speculation. But of this she was not quite sure, for when she bluntly questioned him concerning his moods he had invariably given her an evasive reply. Fearing that there might have been a recurrence of the old trouble with the Two Diamond manager—about which he had told her during her first days at the cabin—she ventured a question. He had grimly assured her that he anticipated no further trouble in that direction. So, unable to get a direct reply from him she had decided that perhaps he would speak when the time came, and so she had ceased questioning.

In spite of his negligence regarding the pony, she had not given up her rides. Nor had she neglected to give a part of each morning to the story.

The work of gradually developing her

THE TWO-GUN MAN

hero's character had been an absorbing task; times when she lingered over the pages of the story she found herself wondering whether she had sounded the depths of his nature. She knew, at least, that she had made him attractive, for as he moved among her pages, she—who should have been satiated with him because of being compelled to record his every word and movement—found his magnetic personality drawing her applause, found that he haunted her dreams, discovered one day that her waking moments were filled with thoughts of him.

But of late she had begun to suspect that her interest in him was not all on account of the story; there were times when she sat long thinking of him, seeing him, watching the lights and shadows of expression come and go in his face. Somewhere between the real Ferguson and the man who was impersonating him in her story was an invisible line that she could not trace. There were times when she could not have told whether the character she admired belonged to the real or the unreal.

A BREAK IN THE STORY

She was thinking much of this to-day while she rode into the subdued light of the cottonwood. Was she, absorbed in the task of putting a real character in her story, to confess that her interest in him was not wholly the interest of the artist who sees the beauties and virtues of a model only long enough to paint them into the picture? The blushes came when she suddenly realized that her interest was not wholly professional, that she had lately lingered long over her model, at times when she had not been thinking of the story at all.

Then, too, she had considered her friends in the East. What would they say if they knew of her friendship with the Two Diamond stray-man? The standards of Eastern civilization were not elastic enough to include the man whom she had come to know so well, who had strode as boldly into her life as he had strode into her story, with his steady, serene eyes, his picturesque rigging, and his two guns, their holsters tied so suggestively and forebodingly down. Would her friends be able to see the romance in

THE TWO-GUN MAN

him? Would they be able to estimate him according to the standards of the world in which he lived, in which he moved so gracefully?

She was aware that, measured by Eastern standards, Ferguson fell far short of the average in those things that combine to produce the polished gentleman. Yet she was also aware that these things were mere accomplishments, a veneer acquired through constant practice—and that usually the person known as “gentleman” could not be distinguished by these things at all—that the real “gentleman” could be known only through the measure of his quiet and genuine consideration and unfailing Christian virtues.

As she rode through the cottonwood, into that deep solitude which brings with it a mighty reverence for nature and a solemn desire for communion with the soul—that solitude in which all affectation disappears and man is face to face with his Maker—she tried to think of Ferguson in an Eastern drawing room, attempting a sham courtesy,

A BREAK IN THE STORY

affecting mannerisms that more than once had brought her own soul into rebellion. But she could not get him into the imaginary picture. He did not belong there; it seemed that she was trying to force a living figure into a company of mechanical puppets. And so they were—puppets who answered to the pulling strings of precedent and established convention.

But at the same time she knew that this society which she affected to despise would refuse to accept him; that if by any chance he should be given a place in it he would be an object of ridicule, or at the least passive contempt. The world did not want originality; would not welcome in its drawing room the free, unaffected child of nature. No, the world wanted pretense, imitation. It frowned upon truth and applauded the sycophant.

She was not even certain that if she succeeded in making Ferguson a real living character the world would be interested in him. But she had reached that state of mind in which she cared very little about the

THE TWO-GUN MAN

world's opinion. She, at least, was interested in him.

Upon the same afternoon—for there is no rule for the mere incidents of life—Ferguson loped his pony through the shade of the cottonwood. He was going to visit the cabin in Bear Flat. Would she be at home? Would she be glad to see him? He could not bring his mind to give him an affirmative answer to either of these questions.

But of one thing he was certain—she had treated him differently from the other Two Diamond men who had attempted to win her friendship. Was he to think then that she cared very little whether he came to the cabin or not? He smiled over his pony's mane at the thought. He could not help but see that she enjoyed his visits.

When he rode up to the cabin he found it deserted, but with a smile he remounted Mustard and set out over the river trail, through the cottonwood. He was sure that he would find her on the hill in the flat, and when he had reached the edge of the cottonwood opposite the hill he saw her.

A BREAK IN THE STORY

When she heard the clatter of his pony's hoofs she turned and saw him, waving a hand at him.

"I reckoned on findin' you here," he said when he came close enough to be heard.

She shyly made room for him beside her on the rock, but there was mischief in her eye. "It seems impossible to hide from you," she said with a pretense of annoyance.

He laughed as he came around the edge of the rock and sat near her. "Was you really tryin' to hide?" he questioned. "Because if you was," he continued, "you hadn't ought to have got up on this hill—where I could see you without even lookin' for you."

"But of course you were not looking for me," she observed quietly.

He caught her gaze and held it—steadily. "I reckon I was lookin' for you," he said.

"Why—why," she returned, suddenly fearful that something had happened to Ben—"is anything wrong?"

He smiled. "Nothin' is wrong," he returned. "But I wanted to talk to you, an' I expected to find you here."

THE TWO-GUN MAN

There was a gentleness in his voice that she had not heard before, and a quiet significance to his words that made her eyes droop away from his with slight confusion. She replied without looking at him.

"But I came here to write," she said.

He gravely considered her, drawing one foot up on the rock and clasping his hands about the knee. "I've thought a lot about that book," he declared with a trace of embarrassment, "since you told me that you was goin' to put real men an' women in it. I expect you've made them do the things that you've wanted them to do an' made them say what you wanted them to say. That part is right an' proper—there wouldn't be any sense of anyone writin' a book unless they could put into it what they thought was right. But what's been botherin' me is this: how can you tell whether the things you've made them say is what they would have said if they'd had any chance to talk? An' how can you tell what their feelin's would be when you set them doin' somethin'?"

She laughed. "That is a prerogative

A BREAK IN THE STORY

which the writer assumes without question," she returned. "The author of a novel makes his characters think and act as the author himself imagines he would act in the same circumstances."

He looked at her with amused eyes. "That's just what I was tryin' to get at," he said. "You've put me into your book, an' you've made me do an' say things out of your mind. But you don't know for sure whether I would have done an' said things just like you've wrote them. Mebbe if I would have had somethin' to say I wouldn't have done things your way at all."

"I am sure you would," she returned positively.

"Well, now," he returned smiling, "you're speakin' as though you was pretty certain about it. You must have wrote a whole lot of the story."

"It is two-thirds finished," she returned with a trace of satisfaction in her voice which did not escape him.

"An' you've got all your characters doin' an' thinkin' things that you think they ought

THE TWO-GUN MAN

to do?" His eyes gleamed craftily. "You got a man an' a girl in it?"

"Of course."

"An' they're goin' to love one another?"

"No other outcome is popular with novel readers," she returned.

He rocked back and forth, his eyes languidly surveying the rim of hills in the distance.

"I expect that outcome is popular in real life too," he observed. "Nobody ever hears about it when it turns out some other way."

"I expect love is always a popular subject," she returned smiling.

His eyes were still languid, his gaze still on the rim of distant hills.

"You got any love talk in there—between the man an' the girl?" he questioned.

"Of course."

"That's mighty interestin'," he returned.

"I expect they do a good bit of mushin'?"

"They do not talk extravagantly," she defended.

"Then I expect it must be pretty good," he returned. "I don't like mushy love

A BREAK IN THE STORY

stories." And now he turned and looked fairly at her. "Of course," he said slyly, "I don't know whether it's necessary or not, but I've been thinkin' that to write a good love story the writer ought to be in love. Whoever was writin' would know more about how it feels to be in love."

She admired the cleverness with which he had led her up to this point, but she was not to be trapped. She met his eyes fairly.

"I am sure it is not necessary for the writer to be in love," she said quietly but positively. "I flatter myself that my love scenes are rather real, and I have not found it necessary to love anyone."

This reply crippled him instantly. "Well, now," he said, eyeing her, she thought, a bit reproachfully, "that comes pretty near stumpin' me. But," he added, a subtle expression coming again into his eyes, "you say you've got only two-thirds finished. Mebbe you'll be in love before you get it all done. An' then mebbe you'll find that you didn't get it right an' have to do it all over again. That would sure be too bad, when

THE TWO-GUN MAN

you could have got in love an' wrote it real in the first place.'

"I don't think that I shall fall in love," she said laughing.

He looked quickly at her, suddenly grave. "I wouldn't want to think you meant that," he said.

"Why?" she questioned in a low voice, her laughter subdued by his earnestness.

"Why," he said steadily, as though stating a perfectly plain fact, "I've thought right along that you liked me. Of course I ain't been fool enough to think that you loved me"—and now he reddened a little—, "but I don't deny that I've hoped that you would."

"Oh, dear!" she laughed; "and so you have planned it all out! And I was hoping that you would not prove so deep as that. You know," she went on, "you promised me a long while ago that you would not fall in love with me."

"I don't reckon that I said that," he returned. "I told you that I wasn't goin' to get fresh. I reckon I ain't fresh now. But

A BREAK IN THE STORY

I expect I couldn't help lovin' you—I've done that since the first day."

She could not stop the blushes—they would come. And so would that thrilling, breathless exultation. No man had ever talked to her like this; no man had ever made her feel quite as she felt at this moment. She turned a crimson face to him.

"But you hadn't any right to love me," she declared, feeling sure that she had been unable to make him understand that she meant to rebuke him. Evidently he did not understand that she meant to do that, for he unclasped his hand from his knee and came closer to her, standing at the edge of the rock, one hand resting upon it.

"Of course I didn't have any right," he said gravely, "but I loved you just the same. There's been some things in my life that I couldn't help doin'. Lovin' you is one. I expect that you'll think I'm pretty fresh, but I've been thinkin' a whole lot about you an' I've got to tell you. You ain't like the women I've been used to. An' I reckon I ain't just the kind of man you've been ac-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

quainted with all your life. You've been used to seein' men who was all slicked up an' clever. I expect them kind of men appeal to any woman. I ain't claimin' to be none of them clever kind, but I've been around quite a little an' I ain't never done anything that I'm ashamed of. I can't offer you a heap, but if you——"

She had looked up quickly, her cheeks burning.

"Please don't," she pleaded, rising and placing a hand on his arm, gripping it tightly. "I have known for a long time, but I—I wanted to be sure." He could not suspect that she had only just now begun to realize that she was in danger of yielding to him and that the knowledge frightened her.

"You wanted to be sure?" he questioned, his face clouding. "What is it that you wanted to be sure of?"

"Why," she returned, laughing to hide her embarrassment, "I wanted to be sure that you loved me!"

"Well, you c'n be sure now," he said.

"I believe I can," she laughed. "And,"

A BREAK IN THE STORY

she continued, finding it difficult to pretend seriousness, "knowing what I do will make writing so much easier."

His face clouded again. "I don't see what your writin' has got to do with it," he said.

"You don't?" she demanded, her eyes widening with pretended surprise. "Why, don't you see that I wanted to be sure of your love so that I might be able to portray a real love scene in my story?"

He did not reply instantly, but folded his arms over his chest and stood looking at her. In his expression was much reproach and not a little disappointment. The hopes that had filled his dreams had been ruined by her frivolous words; he saw her at this moment a woman who had trifled with him, who had led him cleverly on to a declaration of love that she might in the end sacrifice him to her art. But in this moment, when he might have been excused for exhibiting anger; for heaping upon her the bitter reproaches of an outraged confidence, he was supremely calm. The color fled from his face, leaving it slight-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

ly pale, and his eyes swam with a deep feeling that told of the struggle that he was making.

"I didn't think you'd do it, ma'am," he said finally, a little hoarsely. "But I reckon you know your own business best." He smiled slightly. "I don't think there's any use of you an' me meetin' again—I don't want to be goin' on, bein' a dummy man that you c'n watch. But I'm glad to have amused you some an' I have enjoyed myself, talkin' to you. But I reckon you've done what you wanted to do, an' so I'll be gettin' along."

He smiled grimly and with an effort turned and walked around the corner of the rock, intending to descend the hill and mount his pony. But as he passed around to the side of the rock he heard her voice:

"Wait, please," she said in a scarcely audible voice.

He halted, looking gravely at her from the opposite side of the rock.

"You wantin' to get somethin' more for your story?" he asked.

She turned and looked over her shoulder

A BREAK IN THE STORY

at him, her eyes luminous with a tell-tale expression, her face crimson. "Why," she said smiling at him, "do you really think that I could be so mean?"

He was around the rock again in half a dozen steps and standing above her, his eyes alight, his lips parted slightly with surprise and eagerness.

"Do you mean that you wantin' to make sure that I loved you wasn't all for the sake of the story?" he demanded rapidly.

Her eyes drooped away from his. "Didn't you tell me that a writer should be in love in order to be able to write of it?" she asked, her face averted.

"Yes." He was trembling a little and leaning toward her. In this position he caught her low reply.

"I think my love story will be real," she returned. "I have learned——" But whatever she might have wanted to add was smothered when his arms closed tightly about her.

A little later she drew a deep breath and looked up at him with moist, eloquent eyes.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"Perhaps I *shall* have to change the story a little," she said.

He drew her head to his shoulder, one hand caressing her hair. "If you do," he said smiling, "don't have the hero thinkin' that the girl is makin' a fool of him." He drew her close. "That cert'nly was a mighty bad minute you give me," he added.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DIM TRAIL.

A SHADOW fell upon the rock. Ferguson turned his head and looked toward the west, where the sun had already descended over the mountains.

"Why it's sundown!" he said, smiling into Miss Radford's eyes. "I reckon the days must be gettin' shorter."

"The happy days are always short," she returned, blushing. He kissed her for this.

For a while they sat, watching together the vari-colors swimming in the sky. They sat close together, saying little, for mere words are sometimes inadequate. In a little time the colors faded, the mountain peaks began to throw sombre shades; twilight—

THE TWO-GUN MAN

gray and cold—settled suddenly into the flat. Then Miss Radford raised her head from Ferguson's shoulder and sighed.

"Time to go home," she said.

"Yes, time," he returned. "I'm ridin' down that far with you."

They rose and clambered down the hillside and he helped her into the saddle. Then he mounted Mustard and rode across the flat beside her.

Darkness had fallen when they rode through the clearing near the cabin and dismounted from their ponies at the door. The light from the kerosene lamp shone in a dim stream from the kitchen door and within they saw dishes on the table with cold food. Ferguson stood beside his pony while Miss Radford went in and explored the cabin. She came to the door presently, shading her eyes to look out into the darkness.

"Ben has been here and gone," she said. "He can't be very far away. Won't you come in?"

He laughed. "I don't think I'll come in," he returned. "This lover business is new to

THE DIM TRAIL

me, an' I wouldn't want Ben to come back an' ketch me blushin' an' takin' on."

"But he has to know," she insisted, laughing.

"Sure," he said, secure in the darkness, "but you tell him."

"I won't!" she declared positively, stamping a foot.

"Then I reckon he won't get told," he returned quietly.

"Well, then," she said, laughing, "I suppose that is settled."

She came out to the edge of the porch, away from the door, where the stream of light from within could not search them out, and there they took leave of one another, she going back into the cabin and he mounting Mustard and riding away in the darkness.

He was in high spirits, for he had much to be thankful for. As he rode through the darkness, skirting the cottonwood in the flat, he allowed his thoughts to wander. His refusal to enter the cabin had not been a mere whim; he intended on the morrow to seek

THE TWO-GUN MAN

out Ben and tell him. He had not wanted to tell him with her looking on to make the situation embarrassing for him.

When he thought of how she had fooled him by making it appear that she had led him on for the purpose of getting material for her love story, he was moved to silent mirth. "But I cert'nly didn't see anything funny in it while she was puttin' it on," he told himself, as he rode.

He had not ridden more than a quarter of a mile from the cabin, and was passing a clump of heavy shrubbery, when a man rose suddenly out of the shadows beside the trail. Startled, Mustard reared, and then seeing that the apparition was merely a man, he came quietly down and halted, shaking his head sagely. Ferguson's right hand had dropped swiftly to his right holster, but was raised again instantly as the man's voice came cold and steady:

"Get your hands up—quick!"

Ferguson's hands were raised, but he gave no evidence of fear or excitement. Instead, he leaned forward, trying, in the dim light,

THE DIM TRAIL

to see the man's face. The latter still stood in the shadows. But now he advanced a little toward Ferguson, and the stray-man caught his breath sharply. But when he spoke his voice was steady.

"Why, it's Ben Radford," he said.

"That's just who it is," returned Radford. "I've been waitin' for you."

"That's right clever of you," returned Ferguson, drawling his words a little. He was puzzled over this unusual occurrence, but his face did not betray this. "You was wantin' to see me then," he added.

"You're keen," returned Radford, sneering slightly.

Ferguson's face reddened. "I ain't no damn fool," he said sharply. "An' I don't like holdin' my hands up like this. I reckon whatever you're goin' to do you ought to do right quick."

"I'm figuring to be quick," returned Radford shortly. "Ketch hold of your guns with the tips of one finger and one thumb and drop them. Don't hit any rocks and don't try any monkey business."

THE TWO-GUN MAN

He waited until Ferguson had dropped one gun. And then, knowing that the stray-man usually wore two weapons, he continued sharply: "I'm waiting for the other one."

Ferguson laughed. "Then you'll be waitin' a long time. There ain't any 'other one.' Broke a spring yesterday an' sent it over to Cimarron to get it fixed up. You c'n have it when it comes back," he added with a touch of sarcasm, "if you're carin' to wait that long."

Radford did not reply, but came around to Ferguson's left side and peered at the holster. It was empty. Then he looked carefully at the stray-man's waist for signs that a weapon might have been concealed between the waist-band and the trousers—in front. Then, apparently satisfied, he stepped back, his lips closed grimly.

"Get off your horse," he ordered.

Ferguson laughed as he swung down. "Anything to oblige a friend," he said, mockingly.

The two men were now not over a yard apart, and at Ferguson's word Radford's

THE DIM TRAIL

face became inflamed with wrath. "I don't think I'm a friend of yours," he sneered coldly; "I ain't making friends with every damned sneak that crawls around the country, aiming to shoot a man in the back." He raised his voice, bitter with sarcasm. "You're thinking that you're pretty slick," he said; "that all you have to do in this country is to hang around till you get a man where you want him and then bore him. But you've got to the end of your rope. You ain't going to shoot anyone around here.

"I'm giving you a chance to say what you've got to say and then I'm going to fill you full of lead and plant you over in the cottonwood—in a place where no one will ever be able to find you—not even Stafford. I'd have shot you off your horse when you come around the bend," he continued coldly, "but I wanted you to know who was doing it and that the man that did it knowed what you come here to do." He poised his pistol menacingly. "You got anything to say?" he inquired.

Ferguson looked steadily from the muzzle

THE TWO-GUN MAN

of the poised weapon to Radford's frowning eyes. Then he smiled grimly.

"Some one's been talkin'," he said evenly. He calmly crossed his arms over his chest, the right hand slipping carelessly under the left side of his vest. Then he rocked slowly back and forth on his heels and toes. "Some-one's been tellin' you a pack of lies," he added. "I reckon you've wondered, if I was goin' to shoot you in the back, that I ain't done it long ago. You're admittin' that I've had some chance."

Radford sneered. "I ain't wondering why you ain't done it before," he said. "Mebbe it was because you're too white livered. Mebbe you thought you didn't see your chance. I ain't worrying none about why you didn't do it. But you ain't going to get another chance." The weapon came to a foreboding level.

Ferguson laughed grimly, but there was an ironic quality in his voice that caught Radford's ear. It seemed to Radford that the stray-man knew that he was near death, and yet some particular phase of the situa-

THE DIM TRAIL

tion appealed to his humor—grim though it was. It came out when the stray-man spoke.

“You’ve been gassin’ just now about shootin’ people in the back—sayin’ that I’ve been thinkin’ of doin’ it. But I reckon you ain’t thought a lot about the way you’re intendin’ to put me out of business. I was wonderin’ if it made any difference—shootin’ a man in the back or shootin’ him when he ain’t got any guns. I expect a man that’s shot when he ain’t got guns would be just as dead as a man that’s shot in the back, wouldn’t he?”

He laughed again, his eyes gleaming in the dim light. “That’s the reason I ain’t scared a heap,” he said. “From what I know about you you ain’t the man to shoot another without givin’ him a chance. An’ you’re givin’ me a chance to talk. I ain’t goin’ to do any prayin’. I reckon that’s right?”

Radford shifted his feet uneasily. He could not have told at that moment whether or not he had intended to murder Ferguson.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

He had waylaid him with that intention, utterly forgetful that by shooting the stray-man he would be committing the very crime which he had accused Ferguson of contemplating. The muzzle of his weapon drooped uncertainly.

"Talk quick!" he said shortly.

Ferguson grinned. "I'm takin' my time," he returned. "There ain't any use of bein' in such an awful hurry—time don't amount to much when a man's talkin' for his life. I ain't askin' who told you what you've said about me—I've got a pretty clear idea who it was. I've had to tell a man pretty plain that my age has got its growth an' I don't think that man is admirin' me much for bein' told. But if he's wantin' to have me put out of business he's goin' to do the job himself—Ben Radford ain't doin' it."

While he had been talking he had contrived to throw the left side of his vest open, and his right hand was exposed in the dim light—a heavy six-shooter gleaming forebodingly in it. His arms were still crossed, but as he talked he had turned a very little

THE DIM TRAIL

and now the muzzle of the weapon was at a level—trained fairly upon Radford's breast. And then came Ferguson's voice again, quiet, cold, incisive.

"If there's goin' to be any shootin', Ben, there'll be two of us doin' it. Don't be afraid that you'll beat me to it." And he stared grimly over the short space that separated them.

For a full minute neither man moved a muscle. Silence—a premonitory silence—fell over them as they stood, each with a steady finger dragging uncertainly upon the trigger of his weapon. An owl hooted in the cottonwood nearby; other noises of the night reached their ears. Unaware of this crisis Mustard grazed unconcernedly at a distance.

Then Radford's weapon wavered a little and dropped to his side.

"This game's too certain," he said.

Ferguson laughed, and his six-shooter disappeared as mysteriously as it had appeared. "I thought I'd be able to make you see the point," he said. "It don't always

THE TWO-GUN MAN

pay to be in too much of a hurry to do a thing," he continued gravely. "An' I reckon I've proved that someone's been lying about me. If I'd wanted to shoot you I could have done it quite a spell ago—I had you covered just as soon as I crossed my arms. You'd never knowed about it. That I didn't shoot proves that whoever told you I was after you has been romancin'." He laughed.

"An' now I'm tellin' you another thing that I was goin' to tell you about to-morrow. Mebbe you'll want to shoot me for that. But if you do I expect you'll have a woman to fight. Me an' Mary has found that we're of one mind about a thing. We're goin' to hook up into a double harness. I reckon when I'm your brother-in-law you won't be so worried about shootin' me."

Radford's astonishment showed for a moment in his eyes as his gaze met the stray-man's. Then they drooped guiltily.

"Well I'm a damn fool!" he said finally. "I might have knowed that Mary wouldn't get afoul of any man who was thinkin' of

THE DIM TRAIL

doing dirt to me." He suddenly extended a hand. "You shakin'?" he said.

Ferguson took the hand, gripping it tightly. Neither man spoke. Then Radford suddenly unclasped his hand and turned, striding rapidly up the trail toward the cabin.

For a moment Ferguson stood, looking after him with narrowed, friendly eyes. Then he walked to Mustard, threw the bridle rein over the pommel of the saddle, mounted, and was off at a rapid lope toward the Two Diamond.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SHOT IN THE DARK

NOW that Mary Radford had obtained experience for the love scene in her story it might be expected that on returning to the cabin she would get out her writing materials and attempt to transcribe the emotions that had beset her during the afternoon, but she did nothing of the kind. After Ferguson's departure she removed her riding garments, walked several times around the interior of the cabin, and for a long time studied her face in the looking glass. Yes, she discovered the happiness shining out of the glass. Several times, standing before the glass, she attempted to keep the lines of her face in repose, and though she almost succeeded in doing this she could not control her eyes—they simply

THE SHOT IN THE DARK

would gleam with the light that seemed to say to her: "You may deceive people by making a mask of your face, but the eyes are the windows of the soul and through them people will see your secret."

Ben hadn't eaten much, she decided, as she seated herself at the table, after pouring a cup of tea. Before she had finished her meal she had begun to wonder over his absence—it was not his custom to go away in the night. She thought he might have gone to the corral, or might even be engaged in some small task in the stable. So after completing her meal she rose and went to the door, looking out.

There was no moon, only the starlight, but in this she was able to distinguish objects in the clearing, and if Ben had been working about anywhere she must have noticed him. She returned to the table and sat there long, pondering. Then she rose, heated some water, and washed and dried the dishes. Then she swept the kitchen floor and tidied things up a bit, returning to the door when all was complete.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

Still no signs that Ben was anywhere in the vicinity. She opened the screen door and went out upon the porch, leaning against one of the slender posts. For a long time she stood thus, listening to the indescribable noises of the night. This was only the second time since she had been with Ben that he had left her alone at night, and a slight chill stole over her as she watched the dense shadows beyond the clearing, shadows that seemed suddenly dismal and foreboding. She had loved the silence, but now suddenly it too seemed too deep, too solemn to be real. She shuddered, and with some unaccountable impulse shrank back against the screen door, one hand upon it, ready to throw it open. In this position she stood for a few minutes, and then from somewhere in the flat came a slight sound—and then, after a short interval, another.

She shrank back again, a sudden fear chilling her, her hands clasped over her breast.

"Someone is shooting," she said aloud.

She waited long for a repetition of the

THE SHOT IN THE DARK

sounds. But she did not hear them again. Tremblingly she returned to the cabin and resumed her chair at the table, fighting against a growing presentiment that something had gone wrong with Ben. But she could not have told from what direction the sounds had come, and so it would have been folly for her to ride out to investigate. And so for an hour she sat at the table, cringing away from the silence, starting at intervals, when her imagination tricked her into the belief that sound had begun.

And then presently she became aware that there was sound. In the vast silence beyond the cabin door something had moved. She was on her feet instantly, her senses alert. Her fear had left her. Her face was pale, but her lips closed grimly as she went to the rack behind the door and took down a rifle that Ben always kept there. Then she turned the lamp low and cautiously stepped to the door.

A pony whinnied, standing with ears erect at the edge of the porch. In a crumpled heap on the ground lay a man. She caught

THE TWO-GUN MAN

her breath sharply, but in the next instant was out and bending over him. With a strength that seemed almost beyond her she dragged the limp form to the door where the light from the lamp shone upon it.

"Ben!" she said sharply. "What has happened?" She shook him slightly, calling again to him.

Aroused, he opened his eyes, recognized her, and raised himself painfully upon one elbow, smiling weakly.

"It ain't anything, sis," he said. "Creased in the back of the head. Knocked me cold. Mebbe my shoulder too—I ain't been able to lift my arm." He smiled again—grimly, though wearily. "From the back too. The damned sneak!"

Her eyes filled vengefully, and she leaned closer to him, her voice tense. "Who, Ben? Who did it?"

"Ferguson," he said sharply. And again, as his eyes closed: "The damned sneak."

She swayed dizzily and came very near dropping him to the porch floor. But no sound came from her, and presently when

THE SHOT IN THE DARK

the dizziness had passed, she dragged him to the door, propped it open with a chair, and then dragged him on through the opening to the kitchen, and from there to one of the adjoining rooms. Then with pale face and determined lips she set about the work of taking care of Ben's wounds. The spot on the back of the head, she found, was a mere abrasion, as he had said. But his shoulder had been shattered, the bullet, she discovered, having passed clear through the fleshy part of the shoulder, after breaking one of the smaller bones.

Getting her scissors she clipped away the hair from the back of his head and sponged the wound and bandaged it, convinced that of itself it was not dangerous. Then she undressed him, and by the use of plenty of clear, cold water, a sponge, and some bandages, stopped the flow of blood in his shoulder and placed him in a comfortable position. He had very little fever, but she moved rapidly around him, taking his temperature, administering sedatives when he showed signs of restlessness, hovering

THE TWO-GUN MAN

over him constantly until the dawn began to come.

Soon after this he went off into a peaceful sleep, and, almost exhausted with her efforts and the excitement, she threw herself upon the floor beside his bed, sacrificing her own comfort that she might be near to watch should he need her. It was late in the afternoon when Radford opened his eyes to look out through the door that connected his room with the kitchen and saw his sister busying herself with the dishes. His mind was clear and he suffered very little pain. For a long time he lay, quietly watching her, while his thoughts went back to the meeting on the trail with Ferguson. Why hadn't he carried out his original intention of shooting the stray-man down from ambush? He had doubted Leviatt's word and had hesitated, wishing to give Ferguson the benefit of the doubt, and had received his reward in the shape of a bullet in the back—after practically making a peace pact with his intended victim.

He presently became aware that his sister

THE SHOT IN THE DARK

was standing near him, and he looked up and smiled at her. Then in an instant she was kneeling beside him, admonishing him to quietness, smoothing his forehead, giving delighted little gasps over his improved condition. But in spite of her evident cheerfulness there was a suggestion of trouble swimming deep in her eyes; he could not help but see that she was making a brave attempt to hide her bitter disappointment over the turn things had taken. Therefore he was not surprised when, after she had attended to all his wants, she sank on her knees beside him.

"Ben," she said, trying to keep a quiver out of her voice, "are you sure it was Ferguson who shot you?"

He patted her hand tenderly and sympathetically with his uninjured one. "I'm sorry for you, Mary," he returned, "but there ain't any doubt about it." Then he told her of the warning he had received from Leviatt, and when he saw her lips curl at the mention of the Two Diamond range boss's name he smiled.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"I thought the same thing that you are thinking, Mary," he said. "And I didn't want to shoot Ferguson. But as things have turned out I wouldn't have been much wrong to have done it."

She raised her head from the coverlet. "Did you see him before he shot you?" she questioned eagerly.

"Just a little before," he returned. "I met him at a turn in the trail about half a mile from here. I made him get down off his horse and drop his guns. We had a talk, for I didn't want to shoot him until I was sure, and he talked so clever that I thought he was telling the truth. But he wasn't."

He told her about Ferguson's concealed pistol; how they had stood face to face with death between them, concluding: "By that time I had decided not to shoot him. But he didn't have the nerve to pull the trigger when he was looking at me. He waited until I'd got on my horse and was riding away. Then he sneaked up behind."

He saw her body shiver, and he caressed her hair slowly, telling her that he was sorry

THE SHOT IN THE DARK

things had turned out so, and promising her that when he recovered he would bring the Two Diamond stray-man to a strict accounting—providing the latter didn't leave the country before. But he saw that his words had given her little comfort, for when an hour or so later he dropped off to sleep the last thing he saw was her seated at the table in the kitchen, her head bowed in her hands, crying softly.

"Poor little kid," he said, as sleep dimmed his eyes; "it looks as though this would be the end of *her* story."

CHAPTER XX

LOVE AND A RIFLE

FERGUSON did not visit Miss Radford the next morning—he had seen Leviatt and Tucson depart from the ranchhouse, had observed the direction they took, and had followed them. For twenty miles he had kept them in sight, watching them with a stern patience that had brought its reward.

They had ridden twenty miles straight down the river, when Ferguson, concealed behind a ridge, saw them suddenly disappear into a little basin. Then he rode around the ridge, circled the rim of hills that surrounded the basin, and dismounting from his pony, crept through a scrub oak thicket to a point where he could look directly down upon them.

LOVE AND A RIFLE

He was surprised into a subdued whistle. Below him in the basin was an adobe hut. He had been through this section of the country several times but had never before stumbled upon the hut. This was not remarkable, for situated as it was, in this little basin, hidden from sight by a serried line of hills and ridges among which no cow-puncher thought to travel—nor cared to—, the cabin was as safe from prying eyes as it was possible for a human habitation to be.

There was a small corral near the cabin, in which there were several steers, half a dozen cows, and perhaps twenty calves. As Ferguson's eyes took in the latter detail, they glittered with triumph. Not even the wildest stretch of the imagination could produce twenty calves from half a dozen cows.

But Ferguson did not need this evidence to convince him that the men who occupied the cabin were rustlers. Honest men did not find it necessary to live in a basin in the hills where they were shut in from sight of the open country. Cattle thieves did not always find it necessary to do so—unless they

THE TWO-GUN MAN

were men like these, who had no herds of their own among which to conceal their ill-gotten beasts. He was convinced that these men were migratory thieves, who operated upon the herds nearest them, remained until they had accumulated a considerable number of cattle, and then drove the entire lot to some favored friend who was not averse to running the risk of detection if through that risk he came into possession of easily earned money.

There were two of the men, beside Leviatt and Tucson—tall, rangy—looking their part. Ferguson watched them for half an hour, and then, convinced that he would gain nothing more by remaining there, he stealthily backed down the hillside to where his pony stood, mounted, and rode toward the river.

Late in the afternoon he entered Bear Flat, urged his pony at a brisk pace across it, and just before sundown drew rein in front of the Radford cabin. He dismounted and stepped to the edge of the porch, a smile of anticipation on his lips. The noise of his

LOVE AND A RIFLE

arrival brought Mary Radford to the door. She came out upon the porch, and he saw that her face was pale and her lips firmly set. Apparently something had gone amiss with her and he halted, looking at her questioningly.

"What's up?" he asked.

"You ought to know," she returned quietly.

"I ain't good at guessin' riddles," he returned, grinning at her.

"There is no riddle," she answered, still quietly. She came forward until she stood within two paces of him, her eyes meeting his squarely. "When you left here last night did you meet Ben on the trail?" she continued steadily.

He started, reddening a little. "Why, yes," he returned, wondering if Ben had told her what had been said at that meeting; "was he tellin' you about it?"

"Yes," she returned evenly, "he has been telling me about it. That should be sufficient for you. I am sorry that I ever met you. You should know why. If I were you

THE TWO-GUN MAN

I should not lose any time in getting away from here."

Her voice was listless, even flat, but there was a grim note in it that told that she was keeping her composure with difficulty. He laughed, thinking that since he had made the new agreement with the Two Diamond manager he had nothing to fear. "I reckon I ought to be scared," he returned, "but I ain't. An' I don't consider that I'm losin' any time."

Her lips curved sarcastically. "You have said something like that before," she told him, her eyes glittering scornfully. "You have a great deal of faith in your ability to fool people. But you have miscalculated this time.

"I know why you have come to the Two Diamond. I know what made you come over here so much. Of course I am partly to blame. You have fooled me as you have fooled everyone." She stood suddenly erect, her eyes flashing. "If you planned to kill my brother, why did you not have the manhood to meet him face to face?"

LOVE AND A RIFLE

Ferguson flushed. Would it help his case to deny that he had thought of fooling her, that he never had any intention of shooting Ben? He thought not. Leviatt had poisoned her mind against him. He smiled grimly.

"Someone's been talkin'," he said quietly. "You'd be helpin' to make this case clear if you'd tell who it was."

"Someone has talked," she replied; "someone who knows. Why didn't you tell me that you came here to kill Ben? That you were hired by Stafford to do it?"

"Why, I didn't, ma'am," he protested, his face paling.

"You did!" She stamped one foot vehemently.

Ferguson's eyes drooped. "I came here to see if Ben was rustlin' cattle, ma'am," he confessed frankly. "But I wasn't intendin' to shoot him. Why, I've had lots of chances, an' I didn't do it. Ain't that proof enough?"

"No," she returned, her voice thrilling with a sudden, bitter irony, "you didn't shoot

THE TWO-GUN MAN

him. That is, you didn't shoot him while he was looking at you—when there was a chance that he might have given you as good as you sent. No, you didn't shoot him then—you waited until his back was turned. You—you coward!"

Ferguson's lips whitened. "You're talkin' extravagant, ma'am," he said coldly. "Somethin' is all mixed up. Has someone been shootin' Ben?"

She sneered, pinning him with a scornful, withering glance. "I expected that you would deny it," she returned. "That would be following out your policy of deception."

He leaned forward, his eyes wide with surprise. If she had not been laboring under the excitement of the incident she might have seen that his surprise was genuine, but she was certain that it was mere craftiness—a craftiness that she had hitherto admired, but which now awakened a fierce anger in her heart.

"When was he shot?" he questioned quietly.

"Last night," she answered scornfully.

LOVE AND A RIFLE

"Of course that is a surprise to you too. An hour after you left he rode up to the cabin and fell from his horse at the edge of the porch. He had been shot twice—both times in the back." She laughed—almost hysterically. "Oh, you knew enough not to take chances with him in spite of your bragging—in spite of the reputation you have of being a 'two-gun' man!"

He winced under her words, his face whitening, his lips twitching, his hands clenched that he might not lose his composure. But in spite of the conflict that was going on within him at the moment he managed to keep his voice quiet and even. It was admirable acting, she thought, her eyes burning with passion—despicable, contemptible acting.

"I reckon I ain't the snake you think I am, ma'am," he said, looking steadily at her. "But I'm admittin' that mebbe you've got cause to think so. When I left Ben last night I shook hands with him, after fixin' up the difference we'd had. Why, ma'am," he went on earnestly, "I'd just got through

THE TWO-GUN MAN

tellin' him about you an' me figgerin' to get hooked up. An' do you think I'd shoot him after that? Why, if I'd been wantin' to shoot him I reckon there was nothin' to stop me while he was standin' there. He'd never knowed what struck him. I'm tellin' you that I didn't know he was shot; that——"

She made a gesture of impatience. "I don't think I care to hear any more," she said. "I heard the shots here on the porch. I suppose you were so far away at that time that you couldn't hear them?"

He writhed again under the scorn in her voice. But he spoke again, earnestly. "I did hear some shootin'," he said, "after I'd gone on a ways. But I reckoned it was Ben."

"What do you suppose he would be shooting at at that time of the night?" she demanded.

"Why, I don't remember that I was doin' a heap of wonderin' at that time about it," he returned hesitatingly. "Mebbe I thought he was shootin' at a sage-hen, or a prairie-

LOVE AND A RIFLE

dog—or somethin'. I've often took a shot at somethin' like that—when I've been alone that way." He took a step toward her, his whole lithe body alive and tingling with earnestness. "Why, ma'am, there's a big mistake somewheres. If I could talk to Ben I'm sure I could explain——"

She drew her skirts close and stepped back toward the door. "There is nothing to explain—now," she said coldly. "Ben is doing nicely, and when he has fully recovered you will have a chance to explain to him—if you are not afraid."

"Afraid?" he laughed grimly. "I expect, ma'am, that things look pretty bad for me. They always do when someone's tryin' to make 'em. I reckon there ain't any use of tryin' to straighten it out now—you won't listen. But I'm tellin' you this: When everything comes out you'll see that I didn't shoot your brother."

"Of course not," sneered the girl. "You did not shoot him. Stafford did not hire you to do it. You didn't come here, pretending that you had been bitten by a

THE TWO-GUN MAN

rattler, so that you might have a chance to worm yourself into my brother's favor—and then shoot him. You haven't been hanging around Bear Flat all summer, pretending to look for stray Two Diamond cattle. You haven't been trying to make a fool of me——” Her voice trembled and her lips quivered suspiciously.

“Well, now,” said Ferguson, deeply moved; “I'm awful sorry you're lookin' at things like you are. But I wasn't thinkin' to try an' make a fool of you. Things that I said to you I meant. I wouldn't say things to a girl that I said to you if——”

She had suddenly stepped into the cabin and as suddenly reappeared holding the rifle that was kept always behind the door. She stood rigid on the porch, her eyes blazing through the moisture in them.

“You go now!” she commanded hotly; “I've heard enough of your lies! Get away from this cabin! If I ever see you around here again I won't wait for Ben to shoot you!”

Ferguson hesitated, a deep red mounting

LOVE AND A RIFLE

over the scarf at his throat. Then his voice rose, tingling with regret. "There ain't any use of me sayin' anything now, ma'am," he said. "You wouldn't listen. I'm goin' away, of course, because you want me to. You didn't need to get that gun if you wanted to hurt me—what you've said would have been enough." He bowed to her, not even looking at the rifle. "I'm goin' now," he concluded. "But I'm comin' back. You'll know then whether I'm the sneak you've said I was."

He bowed again over the pony's mane and urged the animal around the corner of the cabin, striking the trail that led through the flat toward the Two Diamond ranchhouse.

CHAPTER XXI

THE PROMISE

FERGUSON heard loud talking and laughter in the bunkhouse when he passed there an hour after his departure from the Radford cabin in Bear Flat. It was near sundown and the boys were eating supper. Ferguson smiled grimly as he rode his pony to the corral gate, dismounted, pulled off the bridle and saddle, and turned the animal into the corral. The presence of the boys at the bunkhouse meant that the wagon outfit had come in—meant that Leviatt would have to come in—if he had not already done so.

The stray-man's movements were very deliberate; there was an absence of superfluous energy that told of intensity of thought and

THE PROMISE

singleness of purpose. He shouldered the saddle with a single movement, walked with it to the lean-to, threw it upon its accustomed peg, hung the bridle from the pommel, and then turned and for a brief time listened to the talk and laughter that issued from the open door and windows of the bunkhouse. With a sweep of his hands he drew his two guns from their holsters, rolled the cylinders and examined them minutely. Then he replaced the guns, hitched at his cartridge belt, and stepped out of the door of the lean-to.

In spite of his promise to Mary Radford to the effect that he would return to prove to her that he was not the man who had attempted to kill her brother he had no hope of discovering the guilty man. His suspicions, of course, centered upon Leviatt, but he knew that under the circumstances Mary Radford would have to be given convincing proof. The attempted murder of her brother, following the disclosure that he had been hired by Stafford to do the deed, must have seemed to her sufficient evidence

THE TWO-GUN MAN

of his guilt. He did not blame her for feeling bitter toward him; she had done the only thing natural under the circumstances. He had been very close to the garden of happiness—just close enough to scent its promise of fulfilled joy, when the gates had been violently closed in his face, to leave him standing without, contemplating the ragged path over which he must return to the old life.

He knew that Leviatt had been the instrument that had caused the gates to close; he knew that it had been he who had dropped the word that had caused the finger of accusation to point to him. "Stafford didn't hire you to do it," Mary Radford had said, ironically. The words rang in his ears still. Who had told her that Stafford had hired him to shoot Radford? Surely not Stafford. He himself had not hinted at the reason of his presence at the Two Diamond. And there was only one other man who knew. That man was Leviatt. As he stood beside the door of the lean-to the rage in his heart against the range boss grew more bitter, and

THE PROMISE

the lines around his mouth straightened more grimly.

A few minutes later he stalked into the bunkhouse, among the men who, after finishing their meal, were lounging about, their small talk filling the room. The talk died away as he entered, the men adroitly gave him room, for there was something in the expression of his eyes, in the steely, boring glances that he cast about him, that told these men, inured to danger though they were, that the stray-man was in no gentle mood. He dropped a short word to the one among them that he knew best, at which they all straightened, for through the word they knew that he was looking for Leviatt.

But they knew nothing of Leviatt beyond the fact that he and Tucson had not accompanied the wagon to the home ranch. They inferred that the range boss and Tucson had gone about some business connected with the cattle. Therefore Ferguson did not stop long in the bunkhouse. Without a word he was gone, striding rapidly toward the ranchhouse. They looked after

THE TWO-GUN MAN

him, saying nothing, but aware that his quest for Leviatt was not without significance.

Five minutes later he was in Stafford's office. The latter had been worrying about him. When Ferguson entered the manager's manner was a trifle anxious.

"You seen anything of Radford yet?" he inquired.

"I ain't got anything on Radford," was the short reply.

His tone angered the manager. "I ain't askin' if you've got anything on him," he returned. "But we missed more cattle yesterday, an' it looks mighty suspicious. Since we had that talk about Radford, when you told me it wasn't him doin' the rustlin' I've changed my mind a heap. I'm thinkin' he rustled them cattle last night."

Ferguson looked quizzically at him. "How many cattle you missin'?" he questioned.

Stafford banged a fist heavily down upon his desk top. "We're twenty calves short on the tally," he declared, "an' half a dozen cows. We ain't got to the steers yet, but I'm expectin' to find them short too."

THE PROMISE

Ferguson drew a deep breath. The number of cattle missing tallied exactly with the number he had seen in the basin down the river. A glint of triumph lighted his eyes, but he looked down upon Stafford, drawling:

"You been doin' the tallyin'?"

"Yes."

Ferguson was now smiling grimly. "Where's your range boss?" he questioned.

"The boys say he rode over to the river lookin' for strays. Sent word that he'd be in to-morrow. But I don't see what he's got to do——"

"No," returned Ferguson, "of course. You say them cattle was rustled last night?"

"Yes." Stafford banged his fist down with a positiveness that left no doubt of his knowledge.

"Well, now," observed Ferguson, "an' so you're certain Radford rustled them." He smiled again saturninely.

"I ain't sayin' for certain," returned Stafford, puzzled by Ferguson's manner. "What I'm gettin' at is that there ain't no one

THE TWO-GUN MAN

around here that'd rustle them except Radford."

"There ain't no other nester around here that you know of?" questioned Ferguson.

"No. Radford's the only one."

Ferguson lingered a moment. Then he walked slowly to the door. "I reckon that's all," he said. "To-morrow I'm goin' to show you your rustler."

He had stepped out of the door and was gone into the gathering dusk before Stafford could ask the question that was on the end of his tongue.

CHAPTER XXII

KEEPING A PROMISE

FERGUSON'S dreams had been troubled. Long before dawn he was awake and outside the bunkhouse, splashing water over his face from the tin wash basin that stood on the bench just outside the door. Before breakfast he had saddled and bridled Mustard, and directly after the meal he was in the saddle, riding slowly toward the river.

Before very long he was riding through Bear Flat, and after a time he came to the hill where only two short days before he had reveled in the supreme happiness that had followed months of hope and doubt. It did not seem as though it had been only two days. It seemed that time was playing him

THE TWO-GUN MAN

a trick. Yet he knew that to-day was like yesterday—each day like its predecessor—that if the hours dragged it was because in the bitterness of his soul he realized that to-day could not be—for him—like the day before yesterday; and that succeeding days gave no promise of restoring to him the happiness that he had lost.

He saw the sun rising above the rim of hills that surrounded the flat; he climbed to the rock upon which he had sat—with her—watching the shadows retreat to the mountains, watching the sun stream down into the clearing and upon the Radford cabin. But there was no longer beauty in the picture—for him. Hereafter he would return to that life that he had led of old; the old hard life that he had known before his brief romance had given him a fleeting glimpse of what might have been.

Many times, when his hopes had been high, he had felt a chilling fear that he would never be able to reach the pinnacle of promise; that in the end fate would place before him a barrier—the barrier in the shape of

KEEPING A PROMISE

his contract with Stafford, that he had regretted many times.

Mary Radford would never believe his protest that he had not been hired to kill her brother. Fate, in the shape of Leviatt, had forestalled him there. Many times, when she had questioned him regarding the hero in her story, he had been on the point of taking her into his confidence as to the reason of his presence at the Two Diamond, but he had always put it off, hoping that things would be righted in the end and that he would be able to prove to her the honesty of his intentions.

But now that time was past. Whatever happened now she would believe him the creature that she despised—that all men despised; the man who strikes in the dark.

This, then, was to be the end. He could not say that he had been entirely blameless. He should have told her. But it was not the end that he was now contemplating. There could be no end until there had been an accounting between him and Leviatt. Perhaps the men who had shot Ben Radford in

THE TWO-GUN MAN

the back would never be known. He had his suspicions, but they availed nothing. In the light of present circumstances Miss Radford would never hold him guiltless.

Until near noon he sat on the rock on the crest of the hill, the lines of his face growing more grim, his anger slowly giving way to the satisfying calmness that comes when the mind has reached a conclusion. There would be a final scene with Leviatt, and then——

He rose from the rock, made his way deliberately down the hillside, mounted his pony, and struck the trail leading to the Two Diamond ranchhouse.

About noon Leviatt and Tucson rode in to the Two Diamond corral gate, dismounted from their ponies, and proceeded to the bunkhouse for dinner. The men of the outfit were already at the table, and after washing their faces from the tin wash basin on the bench outside the door, Leviatt and Tucson entered the bunkhouse and took their places. Greetings were given and returned through the medium of short nods——

KEEPING A PROMISE

with several of the men even this was omitted. Leviatt was not a popular range boss, and there were some of the men who had whispered their suspicions that the death of Rope Jones had not been brought about in the regular way. Many of them remembered the incident that had occurred between Rope, the range boss, Tucson, and the new stray-man, and though opinions differed, there were some who held that the death of Rope might have resulted from the ill-feeling engendered by the incident. But in the absence of proof there was nothing to be done. So those men who held suspicions wisely refrained from talking in public.

Before the meal was finished the blacksmith poked his head in through the open doorway, calling: "Ol' Man wants to see Leviatt up in the office!"

The blacksmith's head was withdrawn before Leviatt, who had heard the voice but had not seen the speaker, could raise his voice in reply. He did not hasten, however, and remained at the table with Tucson for five minutes after the other men had left. Then,

THE TWO-GUN MAN

with a final word to Tucson, he rose and strode carelessly to the door of Stafford's office. The latter had been waiting with some impatience, and at the appearance of the range boss he shoved his chair back from his desk and arose.

"Just come in?" he questioned.

"Just come in," repeated Leviatt drawling. "Plum starved. Had to eat before I came down here."

He entered and dropped lazily into a chair near the desk, stretching his legs comfortably. He had observed in Stafford's manner certain signs of a subdued excitement, and while he affected not to notice this, there was a glint of feline humor in his eyes.

"Somebody said you wanted me," he said. "Anything doin'?"

Stafford had held in as long as he could. Now he exploded.

"What in hell do you suppose I sent for you for?" he demanded, as, walking to and fro in the room, he paused and glared down at the range boss. "Where you been? We're

KEEPING A PROMISE

twenty calves an' a dozen cows short on the tally!"

Leviatt looked up, his eyes suddenly flashing. "Whew!" he exclaimed. "They're hittin' them pretty heavy lately. When was they missed?"

Stafford spluttered impotently. "Night before last," he flared. "An' not a damned sign of where they went!"

Leviatt grinned coldly. "Them rustlers is gettin' to be pretty slick, ain't they?" he drawled.

Stafford's face swelled with a rage that threatened to bring on apoplexy. He brought a tense fist heavily down upon his desk top.

"Slick!" he sneered. "I don't reckon they're any slick. It's that I've got a no good outfit. There ain't a man in the bunch could see a rustler if he'd hobbled a cow and was runnin' her calf off before their eyes!" He hesitated to gain breath before continuing. "What have I got an outfit for? What have I got a range boss for? What have I got——!"

THE TWO-GUN MAN

Leviatt grinned wickedly and Stafford hesitated, his hand upraised.

"Your stray-man doin' anything these days?" questioned Leviatt significantly. "Because if he is," resumed Leviatt, before the manager could reply, "he ought to manage to be around where them thieves are workin'."

Stafford stiffened. He had developed a liking for the stray-man and he caught a note of venom in Leviatt's voice.

"I reckon the stray-man knows what he's doin'," he replied. He returned to his chair beside the desk and sat in it, facing Leviatt, and speaking with heavy sarcasm. "The stray-man's the only one of the whole bunch that's doin' anything," he said.

"Sure," sneered Leviatt; "he's gettin' paid for sparkin' Mary Radford."

"Mebbe he is," returned Stafford. "I don't know as I'd blame him any for that. But he's been doin' somethin' else now an' then, too."

"Findin' the man that's been rustlin' your stock, for instance," mocked Leviatt.

KEEPING A PROMISE

Stafford leaned back in his chair, frowning.

"Look here, Leviatt," he said steadily. "I might have spoke a little strong to you about them missin' cattle. But I reckon you're partly to blame. If you'd been minded to help Ferguson a little, instead of actin' like a fool because you've thought he's took a shine to Mary Radford, we might have been further along with them rustlers. As it is, Ferguson's been playin' a lone hand. But he claims to have been doin' somethin'. He ain't been in the habit of blowin' his own horn, an' I reckon we can rely on what he says. I'm wantin' you to keep the boys together this afternoon, for we might need them to help Ferguson out. He's promised to ride in to-day an' show me the man who's been rustlin' my cattle."

Leviatt's lips slowly straightened. He sat more erect, and when he spoke the mockery had entirely gone from his voice and from his manner.

"He's goin' to do what?" he questioned coldly.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"Show me the man who's been rustlin' my cattle," repeated Stafford.

For a brief space neither man spoke—nor moved. Stafford's face wore the smile of a man who has just communicated some unexpected and astonishing news and was watching its effect with suppressed enjoyment. He knew that Leviatt felt bitter toward the stray-man and that the news that the latter might succeed in doing the thing that he had set out to do would not be received with any degree of pleasure by the range boss.

But watching closely, Stafford was forced to admit that Leviatt did not feel so strongly, or was cleverly repressing his emotions. There was no sign on the range boss's face that he had been hurt by the news. His face had grown slightly paler and there was a hard glitter in his narrowed eyes. But his voice was steady.

"Well, now," he said, "that ought to tickle you a heap."

"I won't be none disappointed," returned Stafford.

KEEPING A PROMISE

Leviatt looked sharply at him and crossed his arms over his chest.

"When was you talkin' to him?" he questioned.

"Yesterday."

Leviatt's lips moved slightly. "An' when did you say them cattle was rustled?" he asked.

"Night before last," returned Stafford.

Leviatt was silent for a brief time. Then he unfolded his arms and stood erect, his eyes boring into Stafford's.

"When you expectin' Ferguson?" he questioned.

"He didn't say just when he was comin' in," returned Stafford. "But I reckon we might expect him any time."

Leviatt strode to the door. Looking back over his shoulder, he smiled evilly. "I'm much obliged to you for tellin' me," he said. "We'll be ready for him."

A little over an hour after his departure from the hill, Ferguson rode up to the Two Diamond corral gate and dismounted.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

Grouped around the door of the bunkhouse were several of the Two Diamond men; in a strip of shade from the blacksmith shop were others. Jocular words were hurled at him by some of the men as he drew the saddle from Mustard, for the stray-man's quietness and invariable thoughtfulness had won him a place in the affections of many of the men, and their jocular greetings were evidence of this.

He nodded shortly to them, but did not answer. And instead of lugging his saddle to its accustomed peg in the lean-to, he threw it over the corral fence and left it. Then, without another look toward the men, he turned and strode toward the manager's office.

The latter was seated at his desk and looked up at the stray-man's entrance. He opened his lips to speak, but closed them again, surprised at the stray-man's appearance.

During the months that Ferguson had worked at the Two Diamond, Stafford had not seen him as he looked at this moment.

KEEPING A PROMISE

Never, during the many times the manager had seen him, had he been able to guess anything of the stray-man's emotions by looking at his face. Now, however, there had come a change. In the set, tightly drawn lips were the tell-tale signs of an utterable resolve. In the narrowed, steady eyes was a light that chilled Stafford like a cold breeze in the heat of a summer's day. In the man's whole body was something that shocked the manager into silence.

He came into the room, standing near the door, his set lips moving a very little. "You heard anything from Leviatt yet?" he questioned.

"Why, yes," returned Stafford, hesitatingly; "he was here, talkin' to me. Ain't been gone more'n half an hour. I reckon he's somewhere around now."

"You talkin' to him, you say?" said the stray-man slowly. He smiled mirthlessly. "I reckon you told him about them missin' calves?"

"I sure did!" returned Stafford with much vehemence. He laughed harshly. "I told him

THE TWO-GUN MAN

more," he said; "I told him you was goin' to show me the man who'd rustled them."

Ferguson's lips wreathed into a grim smile. "So you told him?" he said. "I was expectin' you'd do that, if he got in before me. That's why I stopped in here. That was somethin' which I was wantin' him to know. I don't want it to be said that I didn't give him a chance."

Stafford rose from his chair, taking a step toward the stray-man.

"Why, what——?" he began. But a look at the stray-man's face silenced him.

"I've come over here to-day to show you that rustler I told you about yesterday. I'm goin' to look for him now. If he ain't sloped I reckon you'll see him pretty soon."

Leviatt stepped down from the door of the manager's office and strode slowly toward the bunkhouse. On the way he passed several of the men, but he paid no attention to them, his face wearing an evil expression, his eyes glittering venomously.

When he reached the bunkhouse he passed

KEEPING A PROMISE

several more of the men without a word, going directly to a corner of the room where sat Tucson and conversing earnestly with his friend. A little later both he and Tucson rose and passed out of the bunkhouse, walking toward the blacksmith shop.

After a little they appeared, again joining the group outside the bunkhouse. It was while Leviatt and Tucson were in the blacksmith shop that Ferguson had come in. When they came out again the stray-man had disappeared into the manager's office.

Since the day when in the manager's office, Ferguson had walked across the floor to return to Leviatt the leather tobacco pouch that the latter had dropped in the depression on the ridge above the gully where the stray-man had discovered the dead Two Diamond cow and her calf, Leviatt had known that the stray-man suspected him of being leagued with the rustlers. But this knowledge had not disturbed him. He felt secure because of his position. Even the stray-man would have to have absolute, damning evidence before he could hope to

THE TWO-GUN MAN

be successful in proving a range boss guilty of cattle stealing.

Leviatt had been more concerned over the stray-man's apparent success in courting Mary Radford. His hatred—beginning with the shooting match in Dry Bottom—had been intensified by the discovery of Ferguson on the Radford porch in Bear Flat; by the incident at the bunkhouse, when Rope Jones had prevented Tucson from shooting the stray-man from behind, and by the discovery that the latter suspected him of complicity with the cattle thieves. But it had reached its highest point when Mary Radford spurned his love. After that he had realized that just so long as the stray-man lived and remained at the Two Diamond there would be no peace or security for him there.

Yet he had no thought of settling his differences with Ferguson as man to man. Twice had he been given startling proof of the stray-man's quickness with the six-shooter, and each time his own slowness had been crushingly impressed on his mind. He

KEEPING A PROMISE

was not fool enough to think that he could beat the stray-man at that game.

But there were other ways. Rope Jones had discovered that—when it had been too late to profit. Rope had ridden into a carefully laid trap and, in spite of his reputation for quickness in drawing his weapon, had found that the old game of getting a man between two fires had proven efficacious.

And now Leviatt and Tucson were to attempt the scheme again. Since his interview with Stafford, Leviatt had become convinced that the time for action had come. Ferguson had left word with the manager that he was to show the latter the rustler, and by that token Leviatt knew that the stray-man had gathered evidence against him and was prepared to show him to the manager in his true light. He, in turn, had left a message with the manager for Ferguson. "We'll be ready for him," he had said.

He did not know whether Ferguson had received this message. It had been a subtle thought; the words had been merely involun-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

tary. By "We" the manager had thought that he had meant the entire outfit was to be held ready to apprehend the rustler. Leviatt had meant only himself and Tucson.

And they were ready. Down in the blacksmith shop, while Ferguson had ridden in and stepped into the manager's office, had Leviatt and Tucson made their plan. When they had joined the group in front of the bunkhouse and had placed themselves in positions where thirty or forty feet of space yawned between them, they had been making the first preparatory movement. The next would come when Ferguson appeared, to carry out his intention of showing Stafford the rustler.

To none of the men of the outfit did Leviatt or Tucson reveal anything of the nervousness that affected them. They listened to the rough jest, they laughed when the others laughed, they dropped an occasional word of encouragement. They even laughed at jokes in which there was no visible point.

But they did not move from their places,

KEEPING A PROMISE

nor did they neglect to keep a sharp, alert eye out for the stray-man's appearance. And when they saw him come out of the door of the office they neglected to joke or laugh, but stood silent, with the thirty or forty feet of space between them, their faces paling a little, their hearts laboring a little harder.

When Ferguson stepped out of the door of the office, Stafford followed. The stray-man had said enough to arouse the manager's suspicions, and there was something about the stray-man's movements which gave the impression that he contemplated something more than merely pointing out the thief. If warning of impending tragedy had ever shone in a man's eyes, Stafford was certain that it had shone in the stray-man's during the brief time that he had been in the office and when he had stepped down from the door.

Stafford had received no invitation to follow the stray-man, but impelled by the threat in the latter's eyes and by the hint of cold resolution that gave promise of immi-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

nent tragedy, he stepped down also, trailing the stray-man at a distance of twenty yards.

Ferguson did not hesitate once in his progress toward the bunkhouse, except to cast a rapid, searching glance toward a group of two or three men who lounged in the shade of the eaves of the building. Passing the blacksmith shop he continued toward the bunkhouse, walking with a steady stride, looking neither to the right or left.

Other men in the group, besides Leviatt and Tucson, had seen the stray-man coming, and as he came nearer, the talk died and a sudden silence fell. Ferguson came to a point within ten feet of the group of men, who were ranged along the wall of the bunkhouse. Stafford had come up rapidly, and he now stood near a corner of the bunkhouse in an attitude of intense attention.

He was in a position where he could see the stray-man's face, and he marveled at the sudden change that had come into it. The tragedy had gone, and though the hard lines were still around his mouth, the corners twitched a little, as though moved by a cold,

KEEPING A PROMISE

feline humor. There was a hint of mockery in his eyes—a chilling mockery, much like that which the manager had seen in them months before when in Dry Bottom the stray-man had told Leviatt that he thought he was a “plum man.”

But now Stafford stood breathless as he heard the stray-man’s voice, directed at Leviatt. “I reckon you think you’ve been some busy lately,” he drawled.

Meaningless words, as they appear here; meaningless to the group of men and to the Two Diamond manager; yet to Leviatt they were burdened with a dire significance. They told him that the stray-man was aware of his duplicity; they meant perhaps that the stray-man knew of his dealings with the cattle thieves whom he had visited yesterday in the hills near the river. Whatever Leviatt thought, there was significance enough in the words to bring a sneering smile to his face.

“Meanin’?” he questioned, his eyes glittering evilly.

Ferguson smiled, his eyes unwavering and narrowing a very little as they met those of

THE TWO-GUN MAN

his questioner. Deliberately, as though the occasion were one of unquestioned peace, he drew out some tobacco and several strips of rice paper. Selecting one of the strips of paper, he returned the others to a pocket and proceeded to roll a cigarette. His movements were very deliberate. Stafford watched him, fascinated by his coolness. In the tense silence no sound was heard except a subdued rattle of pans in the bunkhouse—telling that the cook and his assistant were at work.

The cigarette was made finally, and then the stray-man lighted it and looked again at Leviatt, ignoring his question, asking another himself. "You workin' down the creek yesterday?" he said.

"Up!" snapped Leviatt. The question had caught him off his guard or he would have evaded it. He had told the lie out of pure perverseness.

Ferguson took a long pull at his cigarette. "Well, now," he returned, "that's mighty peculiar. I'd have sworn that I seen you an' Tucson ridin' down the river yesterday.

KEEPING A PROMISE

Thought I saw you in a basin in the hills, talkin' to some men that I'd never seen before. I reckon I was mistaken, but I'd have sworn that I'd seen you."

Leviatt's face was colorless. Standing with his profile to Tucson, he closed one eye furtively. This had been a signal that had previously been agreed upon. Tucson caught it and turned slightly, letting one hand fall to his right hip, immediately above the butt of his pistol.

"Hell!" sneered Leviatt, "you're seein' a heap of things since you've been runnin' with Mary Radford!"

Ferguson laughed mockingly. "Mebbe I have," he returned. "Ridin' with her sure makes a man open his eyes considerable."

Now he ignored Leviatt, speaking to Stafford. "When I was in here one day, talkin' to you," he said quietly, "you told me about you an' Leviatt goin' to Dry Bottom to hire a gunfighter. I reckon you told that right?"

"I sure did," returned Stafford.

Ferguson took another pull at his cigarette—blowing the smoke slowly sky-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

ward. And he drawled again, so that there was a distinct space between the words.

"I reckon you didn't go around advertisin' that?" he asked.

Stafford shook his head negatively. "There ain't anyone around here knowed anything about that but me an' you an' Leviatt," he returned.

Ferguson grinned coldly. "An' yet it's got out," he stated quietly. "I reckon if no one but us three knowed about it, one of us has been gassin'. I wouldn't think that you'd done any gassin'," he added, speaking to Stafford.

The latter slowly shook his head.

Ferguson continued, his eyes cold and alert. "An' I reckon that I ain't shot off about it—unless I've been dreamin'. Accordin' to that it must have been Leviatt who told Mary Radford that I'd been hired to kill her brother."

Leviatt sneered. "Suppose I did?" he returned, showing his teeth in a savage snarl. "What are you goin' to do about it?"

"Nothin' now," drawled Ferguson. "I'm

KEEPING A PROMISE

glad to hear that you ain't denyin' it." He spoke to Stafford, without removing his gaze from the range boss.

"Yesterday," he stated calmly, "I was ridin' down the river. I found a basin among the hills. There was a cabin down there. Four men was talkin' in front of it. There was twenty calves an' a dozen cows in a corral. Two of the men was——"

Leviatt's right hand dropped suddenly to his holster. His pistol was half out. Tucson's hand was also wrapped around the butt of his pistol. But before the muzzle of either man's gun had cleared its holster, there was a slight movement at the stray-man's sides and his two guns glinted in the white sunlight. There followed two reports, so rapidly that they blended. Smoke curled from the muzzles of the stray-man's pistols.

Tucson sighed, placed both hands to his chest, and pitched forward headlong, stretching his length in the sand. For an instant Leviatt stood rigid, his left arm swinging helplessly by his side, broken by the stray-man's bullet, an expression of surprise

THE TWO-GUN MAN

and fear in his eyes. Then with a sudden, savage motion he dragged again at his gun.

One of the stray-man's guns crashed again, sharply. Leviatt's weapon went off, its bullet throwing up sand in front of Ferguson. Leviatt's eyes closed, his knees doubled under him, and he pitched forward at Ferguson's feet. He was face down, his right arm outstretched, the pistol still in his hand. A thin, blue wreath of smoke rose lazily from its muzzle.

Ferguson bent over him, his weapons still in his hands. Leviatt's legs stretched slowly and then stiffened. In the strained silence that had followed the shooting Ferguson stood, looking gloomily down upon the quiet form of his fallen adversary.

"I reckon you won't lie no more about me," he said dully.

Without a glance in the direction of the group of silent men, he sheathed his weapons and strode toward the ranchhouse.

CHAPTER XXIII

AT THE EDGE OF THE COTTONWOOD

FERGUSON strode into the manager's office and dropped heavily into a chair beside the desk. He was directly in front of the open door and looking up he could see the men down at the bunkhouse congregated around the bodies of Leviatt and Tucson.

The end that he had been expecting for the past two days had come—had come as he knew it must come. He had not been trapped as they had trapped Rope Jones. When he had stood before Leviatt in front of the bunkhouse, he had noted the positions of the two men; had seen that they had expected him to walk squarely into the net that they had prepared for him. His lips curled

THE TWO-GUN MAN

a little even now over the thought that the two men had held him so cheaply. Well, they had learned differently, when too late. It was the end of things for them, and for him the end of his hopes. When he had drawn his guns he had thought of merely wounding Leviatt, intending to allow the men of the outfit to apply to him the penalty that all convicted cattle thieves must suffer. But before that he had hoped to induce Leviatt to throw some light upon the attempted murder of Ben Radford.

However, Leviatt had spoiled all that when he had attempted to draw his weapon after he was wounded. He had given Ferguson no alternative. He had been forced to kill the only man who, he was convinced, could have given him any information about the shooting of Radford, and now, in spite of anything that he might say to the contrary, Mary Radford, and even Ben himself, would always believe him guilty. He could not stay at Two Diamond now. He must get out of the country, back to the old life at the Lazy J, where among his friends he

EDGE OF THE COTTONWOOD

might finally forget. But he doubted much. Did men ever forget women they had loved? Some perhaps did, but he was certain that nothing—not even time—could dim the picture that was now in his mind: the hill in the flat, the girl sitting upon the rock beside him, her eyes illuminated with a soft, tender light; her breeze-blown hair—which he had kissed; which the Sun-Gods had kissed as, coming down from the mountains, they had bathed the hill with the golden light of the evening. He had thought then that nothing could prevent him from enjoying the happiness which that afternoon seemed to have promised. He had watched the sun sinking behind the mountains, secure in the thought that the morrow would bring him added happiness. But now there could be no tomorrow—for him.

Fifteen minutes later Stafford entered the office to find his stray-man still seated in the chair, his head bowed in his hands. He did not look up as the manager entered, and the latter stepped over to him and laid a friendly hand on his shoulder.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

"I'm thankin' you for what you've done for me," he said.

Ferguson rose, leaning one hand on the back of the chair upon which he had been sitting. The manager saw that deep lines had come into his face; that his eyes—always steady before—were restless and gleaming with an expression which seemed unfathomable. But he said nothing until the manager had seated himself beside the desk. Then he took a step and stood looking into Stafford's upturned face.

"I reckon I've done what I came here to do," he said grimly. "I'm takin' my time now."

Stafford's face showed a sudden disappointment.

"Shucks!" he returned, unable to keep the regret from his voice. "Ain't things suited you here?"

The stray-man grinned with straight lips. He could not let the manager know his secret. "Things have suited me mighty well," he declared. "I'm thankin' you for havin' made things pleasant for me while

EDGE OF THE COTTONWOOD

I've been here. But I've done what I contracted to do an' there ain't anything more to keep me here. If you'll give me my time I'll be goin'."

Stafford looked up at him with a sly, significant smile. "Why," he said, "Leviatt told me that you'd found somethin' real interestin' over on Bear Flat. Now, I shouldn't think you'd want to run away from her!"

The stray-man's lips whitened a little. "I don't think Mary Radford is worryin' about me," he said steadily.

"Well, now," returned Stafford, serious again; "then I reckon Leviatt had it wrong."

"I expect he had it wrong," answered the stray-man shortly.

But Stafford did not yield. He had determined to keep the stray-man at the Two Diamond and there were other arguments that he had not yet advanced which might cause him to stay. He looked up again, his face wearing a thoughtful expression.

"I reckon you remember our contract?" he questioned.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

The stray-man nodded. "I was to find out who was stealin' your cattle," he said.

Stafford smiled slightly. "Correct!" he returned. "You've showed me two thieves. But a while ago I heard you say that there was two more. Our contract ain't fulfilled until you show me them too. You reckon?"

The stray-man drew a deep, resigned breath. "I expect that's right," he admitted. "But I've told you where you can find them. All you've got to do is to ride over there an' catch them."

Stafford's smile widened a little. "Sure," he returned, "that's all I've got to do. An' I'm goin' to do it. But I'm wantin' my range boss to take charge of the outfit that's goin' over to ketch them."

"Your range boss?" said Ferguson, a flash of interest in his eyes, "Why, your range boss ain't here any more."

Stafford leaned forward, speaking seriously. "I'm talkin' to my range boss right now!" he said significantly.

Ferguson started, and a tinge of slow color came into his face. He drew a deep

EDGE OF THE COTTONWOOD

breath and took a step forward. But suddenly he halted, his lips straightening again.

"I'm thankin' you," he said slowly. "But I'm leavin' the Two Diamond." He drew himself up, looking on the instant more his old indomitable self. "I'm carryin' out our contract though," he added. "If you're wantin' me to go after them other two men, I ain't backin' out. But you're takin' charge of the outfit. I ain't goin' to be your range boss."

An hour later ten of the Two Diamond men, accompanied by Stafford and the stray-man, loped their horses out on the plains toward the river. It was a grim company on a grim mission, and the men forbore to joke as they rode through the dust and sunshine of the afternoon. Ferguson rode slightly in advance, silent, rigid in the saddle, not even speaking to Stafford, who rode near him.

Half an hour after leaving the Two Diamond they rode along the crest of a ridge of hills above Bear Flat. They had been riding here only a few minutes when Stafford, who had been watching the stray-man,

THE TWO-GUN MAN

saw him start suddenly. The manager turned and followed the stray-man's gaze.

Standing on a porch in front of a cabin on the other side of the flat was a woman. She was watching them, her hands shading her eyes. Stafford saw the stray-man suddenly dig his spurs into his pony's flanks, saw a queer pallor come over his face. Five minutes later they had ridden down through a gully to the plains. Thereafter, even the hard riding Two Diamond boys found it difficult to keep near the stray-man.

Something over two hours later the Two Diamond outfit, headed by the stray-man, clattered down into a little basin, where Ferguson had seen the cabin two days before. As the Two Diamond men came to within a hundred feet of the cabin two men, who had been at work in a small corral, suddenly dropped their branding irons and bolted toward the cabin. But before they had time to reach the door the Two Diamond men had surrounded them, sitting grimly and silently in their saddles. Several of Stafford's men had drawn their weapons, but were now

EDGE OF THE COTTONWOOD

returning them to their holsters, for neither of the two men was armed. They stood within the grim circle, embarrassed, their heads bowed, their attitude revealing their shame at having been caught so easily. One of the men, a clear, steady-eyed fellow, laughed frankly.

"Well, we're plum easy, ain't we boys?" he said, looking around at the silent group. "Corraled us without lettin' off a gun. That's what I'd call re-diculous. You're right welcome. But mebbe you wouldn't have had things so easy if we hadn't left our guns in the cabin. Eh, Bill?" he questioned, prodding the other man playfully in the ribs.

But the other man did not laugh. He stood before them, his embarrassment gone, his eyes shifting and fearful.

"Shut up, you damn fool!" he snarled.

But the clear-eyed man gave no attention to this outburst. "You're Two Diamond men, ain't you?" he asked, looking full at Ferguson.

The latter nodded, and the clear-eyed man continued. "Knowed you right off," he de-

THE TWO-GUN MAN

clared, with a laugh. "Leviatt pointed you out to me one day when you was ridin' out yonder." He jerked a thumb toward the distance. "Leviatt told me about you. Wanted to try an' plug you with his six, but decided you was too far away." He laughed self-accusingly. "If you'd been half an hour later, I reckon you wouldn't have proved your stock, but we loafed a heap, an' half of that bunch ain't got our brand."

"We didn't need to look at no brand," declared Stafford grimly.

The clear-eyed man started a little. Then he laughed. "Then you must have got Leviatt an' Tucson," he said. He turned to Ferguson. "If Leviatt has been got," he said, "it must have been you that got him. He told me he was runnin' in with you some day. I kept tellin' him to be careful."

Ferguson's eyelashes twitched a little. "Thank you for the compliment," he said.

"Aw, hell!" declared the man, sneering. "I wasn't mushin' none!"

Stafford had made a sign to the men and some of them dismounted and approached

EDGE OF THE COTTONWOOD

the two rustlers. The man who had profanely admonished the other to silence made some little resistance, but in the end he stood within the circle, his hands tied behind him. The clear-eyed man made no resistance, seeming to regard the affair in the light of a huge joke. Once, while the Two Diamond men worked at his hands, he told them to be careful not to hurt him.

"I'm goin' to be hurt enough, after a while," he added.

There was nothing more to be done. The proof of guilt was before the Two Diamond men, in the shape of several calves in the small corral that still bore the Two Diamond brand. Several of the cows were still adorned with the Two Diamond ear mark, and in addition to this was Ferguson's evidence. Therefore the men's ponies were caught up, saddled, and the two men forced to mount. Then the entire company rode out of the little gully through which the Two Diamond outfit had entered, riding toward the cottonwood that skirted the river—miles away.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

A little while before sunset the cavalcade rode to the edge of the cottonwood. Stafford halted his pony and looked at Ferguson, but the stray-man had seen enough tragedy for one day and he shook his head, sitting gloomily in the saddle.

"I'm waitin' here," he said simply. "There'll be enough in there to do it without me."

The clear-eyed man looked at him with a grim smile.

"Why, hell!" he said. "You ain't goin' in?" his eyes lighted for an instant. "I reckon you're plum white!" he declared. "You ain't aimin' to see any free show."

"I'm sayin' so-long to you," returned Ferguson. "You're game." A flash of admiration lighted his eyes.

The clear-eyed man smiled enigmatically. "I'm stayin' game!" he declared grimly, without boast. "An' now I'm tellin' you somethin'. Yesterday Leviatt told me he'd shot Ben Radford. He said he'd lied to Ben about you an' that he'd shot him so's his sister would think you done it. You've been

EDGE OF THE COTTONWOOD

white, an' so I'm squarin' things for you. I'm wishin' you luck."

For an instant he sat in the saddle, watching a new color surge into the stray-man's face. Then his pony was led away, through a tangle of undergrowth at the edge of the cottonwood. When Ferguson looked again, the little company had ridden into the shadow, but Ferguson could make out the clear-eyed man, still erect in his saddle, still seeming to wear an air of unstudied nonchalance. For a moment longer Ferguson saw him, and then he was lost in the shadows.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE END OF THE STORY

TWO weeks later Ferguson had occasion to pass through Bear Flat. Coming out of the flat near the cottonwood he met Ben Radford. The latter, his shoulder mending rapidly, grinned genially at the stray-man.

"I'm right sorry I made that mistake, Ferguson," he said; "but Leviatt sure did give you a bad reputation."

Ferguson smiled grimly. "He won't be sayin' bad things about anyone else," he said. And then his eyes softened. "But I'm some sorry for the cuss," he added.

"He had it comin'," returned Ben soberly. "An' I'd rather it was him than me." He looked up at Ferguson, his eyes narrowing quizzically. "You ain't been around here for

THE END OF THE STORY

a long time," he said. "For a man who's just been promoted to range boss you're unnaturally shy."

Ferguson smiled. "I ain't paradin' around showin' off," he returned. "Someone might take it into their head to bore me with a rifle bullet."

Radford's grin broadened. "I reckon you're wastin' valuable time," he declared. "For I happen to know that she wouldn't throw nothing worse'n a posy at you!"

"You don't say?" returned Ferguson seriously. "I reckon——"

He abruptly turned his pony down the trail that led to the cabin. As he rode up to the porch there was a sudden movement, a rustle, a gasp of astonishment, and Mary Radford stood in the doorway looking at him. For a moment there was a silence that might have meant many things. Both were thinking rapidly over the events of their last meeting at this very spot. Then Ferguson moved uneasily in the saddle.

"You got that there rifle anywheres handy?" he asked, grinning at her.

THE TWO-GUN MAN

Her eyes drooped; one foot nervously pushed out the hem of her skirts. Then she laughed, flushing crimson.

"It wasn't loaded anyway," she said.

The sunset was never more beautiful than to-day on the hill in Bear Flat. Mary Radford sat on the rock in her accustomed place and stretched out, full length beside her, was Ferguson. He was looking out over the flat, at the shadows of the evening that were advancing slowly toward the hill.

She turned toward him, her eyes full and luminous. "I am almost at the end of my story," she said smiling at him. "But," and her forehead wrinkled perplexedly, "I find the task of ending it more difficult than I had anticipated. It's a love scene," she added banteringly; "do you think you could help me?"

He looked up at her. "I reckon I could help you in a real love scene," he said, "but I ain't very good at pretendin'."

"But this is a real love scene," she replied stoutly; "I am writing it as it actually oc-

THE END OF THE STORY

curred to me. I have reached the moment when you—I mean the hero—has declared his love for me,—of course (with a blush) I mean the heroine, and she has accepted him. But they are facing a problem. In the story he has been a cowpuncher and of course has no permanent home. And of course the reader will expect me to tell how they lived after they had finally decided to make life's journey together. Perhaps you can tell me how the hero should go about it."

"Do you reckon that any reader is that inquisitive?" he questioned.

"Why of course."

He looked anxiously at her. "In that case," he said, "mebbe the reader would want to know what the heroine thought about it. Would she want to go back East to live—takin' her cowpuncher with her to show off to her Eastern friends?"

She laughed. "I thought you were not very good at pretending," she said, "and here you are trying to worm a declaration of my intentions out of me. You did not need to go about that so slyly," she told him,

THE TWO-GUN MAN

with an earnestness that left absolutely no doubt of her determination, "for I am going to stay right here. Why," she added, taking a deep breath, and a lingering glance at the rift in the mountains where the rose veil descended, "I love the West."

He looked at her, his eyes narrowing with sympathy. "I reckon it's a pretty good little old country," he said. He smiled broadly. "An' now I'm to tell you how to end your story," he said, "by givin' you the hero's plans for the future. I'm tellin' you that they ain't what you might call elaborate. But if your inquisitive reader must know about them, you might say that Stafford is givin' his hero—I'm meanin', of course, his range boss—a hundred dollars a month—bein' some tickled over what his range boss has done for him.

"An' that there range boss knows when he's got a good thing. He's goin' to send to Cimarron for a lot of stuff—fixin's an' things for the heroine,—an' he's goin' to make a proposition to Ben Radford to make his cabin a whole lot bigger. Then him an'

THE END OF THE STORY

the heroine is goin' to live right there—right where the hero meets the heroine the first time—when he come there after bein' bit by a rattler. An' then if any little heroes or heroines come they'd have——”

Her hand was suddenly over his mouth. “Why—why——” she protested, trying her best to look scornful—“do you imagine that I would think of putting such a thing as that into my book?”

He grinned guiltily. “I don't know anything about writin’,” he said, properly humbled, “but I reckon it wouldn't be any of the reader's business.”

THE END.

THE COMING OF THE LAW

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE ARRIVAL OF THE MAN	9
II. THE RULE OF CATTLE	25
III. NORTON MAKES A DISCOVERY	42
IV. AT THE CIRCLE BAR	53
V. THE GIRL OF DRY BOTTOM	73
VI. HOLLIS RENEWS AN ACQUAINTANCE	87
VII. THE "KICKER" BECOMES AN INSTITUTION	107
VIII. CONCERNING THE "SIX O'CLOCK"	119
IX. HOW A BAD MAN LEFT THE "KICKER"	
OFFICE	127
X. THE LOST TRAIL	151
XI. PICKING UP THE TRAIL	161
XII. AFTER THE STORM	169
XIII. "WOMAN—SHE DON'T NEED NO TOOTER"	177
XIV. THE COALITION	187
XV. TO SUPPORT THE LAW	198
XVI. THE BEARER OF GOOD NEWS	209
XVII. THE RUSTLER	224
XVIII. THE TENTH DAY	238
XIX. HOW A RUSTLER ESCAPED	246
XX. THE "KICKER'S" CANDIDATE	257
XXI. DUNLAVEY PLAYS A CARD	267

XXII. PROOF OF GRATITUDE	280
XXIII. TEN SPOT USES HIS EYES	289
XXIV. CAMPAIGN GUNS	294
XXV. HANDLING THE LAW	314
XXVI. AUTUMN AND THE GODS	327
XXVII. THE SEAR AND YELLOW DAYS	336
XXVIII. IN DEFIANCE OF THE LAW	342
XXIX. THE ARM OF THE LAW	354
XXX. FORMING A FRIENDSHIP	364
XXXI. AFTERWARD	375

THE COMING OF THE LAW

CHAPTER I

THE ARRIVAL OF THE MAN

IF the passengers on the west-bound train that pulled up at the little red wooden station at Dry Bottom at the close of a June day in 18—, were interested in the young man bearing the two suit cases, they gave no evidence of it. True, they noted his departure; with casual glances they watched him as he stepped down upon the platform; but immediately they forgot his athletic figure and his regular featured, serious face as their thoughts returned to the heat, the dust, and the monotony of travel.

There was the usual bustle and activity which always follows the arrival of a train. A mail bag was dumped out of the mail car, another thrown in; some express packages were uncereemoniously deposited near the door of the station by the agent; the conductor ran to the telegrapher's

window to receive an order; ran back, signaling as he ran; the engine bell clanged, the drivers clanked, the wheels ground, the passengers sighed, and the train departed on its way.

The young man who had alighted stood motionless for a moment, listening to the clatter of the wheels over the rail-joints, watching the smoke from the engine-stack befoul the clear blue of the sky. Then he smiled grimly, threw a rapid glance toward a group of loungers standing at a corner of the station, and walked over to where the station agent stood examining some newly arrived packages.

“Do you mind directing me to the courthouse?” said the young man.

The agent looked up, turned, and ran a measuring, speculative eye over the new arrival. He noted the Eastern cut of the young man’s clothing and beneath the dust of travel the clear, healthy white skin of his face. “Stranger here?” observed the agent, with a slight, humorous narrowing of the eyes.

“Yes.”

“No, I don’t mind,” resumed the agent, answering the young man’s question. “You won’t have any trouble findin’ the courthouse. There’s only one street in this town an’ the courthouse is down to the other end of it—you couldn’t miss

it if you tried." He grinned with some amusement at the young man's back as the latter with a cordial "thank you," returned to his suit cases, gripped them firmly by the handles, and strode down the wooden platform toward the street, ignoring the group of loungers at the corner of the station.

" 'Nother tenderfoot," remarked one of the loungers as the young man passed out of hearing; "they're runnin' this country plum to hell!"

The young man strode slowly down the board sidewalk that paralleled the buildings on one side of the street, mentally taking in the dimensions of the town. It was not an inviting picture. Many buildings of various descriptions snuggled the wide, vacant space which the station agent had termed a "street." Most of the buildings were unpainted and crude, composed of rough boards running perpendicularly, with narrow battens over the joints. There were several brick buildings two stories in height, bearing the appearance of having been recently erected, and these towered over the squat, one-story frames in seeming contemptuous dignity. There were many private dwellings, some stores, but the young man's first impression was that there was an enormous number of saloons.

He saw few people; those who came within

range of vision were apparently cowboys, for they were rigged in the picturesque garb that he had studied many times in the illustrations of Eastern magazines. He had admired them afar, for there was something about them, something in the free, wild life they led, that appealed to him; something that struck at the primitive in his heart. He had heard tales of them; travelers returning from these regions had related sundry stories of these wild men of the plains; stories of their hardihood, of their recklessness, of their absolute fearlessness—clothing them with a glamor and romance that had deeply impressed the young man. His own life had been rather prosaic.

He saw some cowponies hitched to rails in front of several of the saloons; in front of a store he observed a canvas-covered wagon which he recognized (from sketches he had seen) as a "prairie schooner"; in front of another store he saw a spring wagon of the "buckboard" variety. That was all. The aroma of sage-brush filled his nostrils; the fine, flint-like, powdered alkali dust lay thick everywhere. It was unattractive and dismal.

The town, as it lay before him, began in desolation and ended in desolation. Except that it was a trifle larger it differed in no important particular from many others that littered the face

of the world through which he had passed during the last twenty-four hours. It was a mere dot in the center of a flat grass country covering a vast area. It sat, serene in its isolation, as far from civilization as Genesis from Revelation. In the stifling heat of the lazy June afternoon it drowsed, seemingly deserted except for the ponies and the two wagons, and the few incurious cowboys who had rewarded the young man with their glances. Apparently whatever citizens were here were busy in the saloons. As this thought flashed upon the young man his lips straightened grimly. But he continued slowly on his way, giving much attention to objects that came within his range of vision. The more he saw of the town, the less pleased he was with it.

The suit cases were heavy; he paused in front of a building and set them down, while with his handkerchief he mopped the dust and perspiration from his forehead. He saw a flaring sign on the roof of the building in front of which he had stopped and he read the legend with a smile of derision: "The Fashion Saloon." Several ponies were hitched to the rail in front of the building; the bridle of one was gaily decorated with a bow of ribbon. Only a woman would have decorated a pony thus, the young man decided with a smile. Yet what sort of woman

would hitch her pony in front of a saloon? He looked about him for some explanation and saw a vacant space beside him and beside the vacant space a store. There was no hitching rail in front of the store, therefore here was the explanation. He heard a sound behind him and turning he beheld the figures of a man and a woman in the vacant space between the two buildings.

The woman seemed to be little more than a girl, for as the young man watched she turned slightly toward him—though not seeing him—and he saw youth pictured on her face, and innocence, though withal she gave the young man an impression of sturdy self-reliance that awakened instant admiration for her in his mind.

She was attired in picturesque costume, consisting of short riding skirt, boots, felt hat, woollen blouse with a flowing tie at the throat, gloves, and spurs. It was not the sort of thing to which the young man was accustomed, but she made an attractive picture and he took in every detail of her appearance with eager eyes.

It was some time before he noticed the man. The latter stood facing the girl and he could not get a view of his face. He had a gigantic frame, with huge shoulders that loomed above the girl, dwarfing her. The young man remained motionless, watching the two, for there was some-

thing in the big man's attitude that held him. The man turned presently and the young man had a glimpse of his face. It was heavy featured, coarse, and an unmistakable brutality was betrayed in it. The young man's lips curled. He did not like the type, and it was the girl's face that held him now that he had seen the man's.

He leaned easily against the front of the building, not over fifteen feet distant from the two, trying to appear uninterested, but not concealing his interest. He believed the girl had not seen him, for though she had looked in his direction he was sure that her glance had passed him to rest on the pony at the hitching rail. Swift as the glance had been the young man had seen in her face an expression that caused him to decide to remain where he was until the girl mounted her pony, no matter how long that time might be. So he relaxed, leaning against the building—attentive, listening, though apparently entirely unconcerned over their conversation.

The girl seemed moved with some deep emotion over something the big man had said, for her slight figure had stiffened and she stood looking at him with an angry, intense gaze. The big man had been taunting her, for his teeth showed in a mocking grin as he hovered near her, apparently sure of her. It was like a lion playing with

16 *THE COMING OF THE LAW*

a mouse. Then the young **man** heard the big man's voice:

"So you don't take kindly to my courting? Don't want anything to do with me at all?" His forced laugh had a harshness in it that caused the young man's muscles to stiffen. He took a sly glance at the girl and saw her chin uplift with disdain.

"Do you think it necessary for me to tell you that—again?" she said.

A strange satisfaction thrilled the young man; sympathy for her drew his mouth into a peculiarly grim smile. But he had no time to enjoy his satisfaction for the big man spoke and this time he did not laugh.

"Well," he said shortly, "you're going to have something to do with me. You're going to hook up with me or I'm putting that crazy brother of yours out of business!"

The girl was suddenly rigid and a deep red as suddenly suffused her cheeks. The young man's face paled at the threat, his teeth came together with a snap, and he leaned forward, wishing to hear some more of this extraordinary conversation. More of it came quickly. The girl spoke, her voice even and well controlled, though burdened with a biting sarcasm:

"What a terrible man you are, to be sure, to

threaten to make war upon a defenseless girl and her afflicted brother. But I'm not afraid of you!"

She took a step toward him, standing very close to him and looking straight into his eyes. She was fighting bravely for her composure, but the young man had seen that her lips had quivered pitifully during her brief speech. He stiffened with sympathy. He could not, of course, understand this strange conversation, but he could discern its drift, and the suggestive underplay in the big man's words. But plainly he had not been mistaken in his estimate of the young woman—she seemed entirely able to take care of herself.

He crowded a little closer, though he knew that this conversation was none of his affair further than that he was interested—as any man would be interested—in seeing that the young woman received decent treatment. Certainly so far she had not received that, yet neither had the big man said anything to warrant interference by a stranger. Stealing another glance, the young man saw a heavy revolver at the man's hip, and he did not doubt, from what he had thus far seen of him, that he would use the weapon should he turn and discover that there was a listener to his conversation. Such an action would accord

perfectly with tales that the young man had heard of this section of the country. But he edged closer.

The big man's face had become poisonously bloated. The girl's defiance seemed to have enraged him.

"Hell!" he said venomously. "You're talking damn brave!" He leaned closer to her. "And you think you'd be disgraced if folks knowed you was a friend of mine?" He laughed harshly. "Most folks are tickled to be known as my friend. But I'm telling you this: If I ain't a friend I'm an enemy, and you're doing as I say or I'm making things mighty unpleasant for you and your poor, 'afflicted' brother!"

The young man saw the girl's hands clench, saw her face grow slowly pale. Twice now had the big man taunted her about her brother, and plainly his words had hurt her. Words trembled on her lips but refused to come. But for an instant she forced her eyes to meet those of the man and then they suddenly filled with tears. She took a backward step, her shoulders drooping. The big man followed her, gloating over her. Again the young man's thoughts went to the lion and the mouse.

"Hurts, does it?" said the big man, brutally.

“Well, you’ve brought it on yourself, being such a damn prude!”

He reached out and grasped her by the shoulder. She shrank back, struggling with him, trying to grasp the butt of an ivory-handled revolver that swung at her right hip. The big man pinned her arms and the effort was futile.

And then retribution—like an avalanche—struck the big man. He heard the movement, sensed the danger, and flung his right hand toward his pistol butt. There was a silent struggle; a shot, one of the young man’s arms swung out—flail like—the clenched hand landing with a crash. The big man went down like a falling tree—prone to the ground, his revolver flying ten feet distant, a little blue-white smoke curling lazily upward out of its muzzle. The big man was raised again—bodily—and hurled down again. He lay face upward in the white sunlight—a mass of bruised and bleeding flesh.

The young man’s anger had come and gone. He stood over the big man, looking down at him, his white teeth gleaming through his slightly parted lips.

“I think that will do for you,” he said in an even, passionless voice.

For an instant there was a tense silence. The

young man turned and looked at the girl, who was regarding him with surprised and bewildered eyes.

The young man smiled mirthlessly. "I think I waited rather too long. But he won't bother you again—at least for a few minutes."

He saw the girl's gaze directed to a point somewhere behind him and he turned to see that a door in the side of the Fashion Saloon was vomiting men. They came rushing out, filling the space between the two buildings—cowboys mostly, with a sprinkling of other men whose appearance and attire proclaimed them citizens. The young man stood silent while the newcomers ranged themselves about him, others giving their attention to the big man who still lay on the ground. The girl had not moved; she was standing near the young man, her face pale, her slight figure rigid, her eyes wide and flashing. The young man looked from her to the men who had crowded about him and he became aware that one of the men—a slender, olive-skinned cowboy—evidently a half-breed—was speaking to him. He stood looking at the man, saw menace in his eyes, heard his voice, writhing in profane accusation:

"So you've shot Beeg Beel, you tenderfoot — — —!" said the man. His right hand

was hooked in his cartridge belt, near the butt of his six-shooter.

The young man had been coldly scrutinizing the face of the half-breed; he had seen a sneering insolence on the thin, snarling lips, and he knew instantly that this man was a friend of his fallen adversary. He had smiled grimly when the man had begun speaking, being willing to argue the justice of his action in striking the big man, but at the man's vile insult his white teeth gleamed again and his right arm flew out—like a flail—the fist crashing against the half-breed's jaw. Like the big man the half-breed collapsed in a heap on the ground. There was a sudden movement in the crowd, and pistols flashed in the sunlight. The young man took a backward step, halted, drew himself up and faced them, his lips curling.

“Of course you'll shoot now,” he said bitterly.

He heard a rustle beside him, and turned to see the girl standing within a foot of him, the ivory-handled pistol in hand, her eyes flashing coldly.

“I don't think that any of them are going to shoot,” she declared evenly, her voice resounding in the sudden silence that had fallen; “Big Bill got just what he deserved, and this gentle-

man will not be molested. He isn't armed," she said, with a dry laugh; "shooting him would be murder, and if he is shot I promise to avenge him immediately." She turned slightly, speaking to the young man while keeping her eyes on the men around her. During the pause that followed her words several of the men stealthily sheathed their weapons and stepped back.

"I think Big Bill is able to fight his own battles," continued the girl, taking advantage of the evident reluctance of the men to force trouble.

Her face became slightly paler as she saw the big man sit up and stare about him. He got to his feet and stood, swaying dizzily for an instant, and then his gaze sought out the young man and was fixed on him with foreboding malignance. His right hand fell to his holster, and finding no weapon there he turned and sought it, finding it, and returning to a point near the young man, the weapon in hand. As he halted there was another movement and the half-breed was on his feet and dragging at his revolver. The young man crouched, prepared to spring, and the big man spoke sharply to the half-breed.

"Quit it!" he said, snarling. "Mind your own business!" Then he seemed to realize that the half-breed had been worsted also, for he

looked at the latter, saw the dust on his clothing and grinned expressively.

"So he got you too, did he, Yuma?" His heavy features wreathed into a mocking sneer as he faced the young man.

"Knocked me down!" he said in a silky, even voice. "Knocked me cold with a punch. Knocked Yuma Ed down too!" He took another step toward the young man and surveyed him critically, his eyes glinting with something very near amusement. Then he stepped back, laughing shortly.

"I ain't shooting you," he said. "I've got an idea that you and me will meet again." There was an ominous threat in his voice as he continued: "Shooting you wouldn't half pay you back. Mark that, young man—shooting you wouldn't half pay you back."

He stepped away from the young man, motioning the other men into the door through which they had emerged to come to his assistance, and they filed slowly in without protest. The big man paused long enough to look again at the young man.

"Knocked me down!" he said as though scarcely able to realize the truth; "knocked me cold with a punch!" He laughed, his coarse features twisting into an odd expression. "Well,

24 *THE COMING OF THE LAW*

I'll be damned!" He turned abruptly and disappeared through the door through which the other men had gone.

For an instant the young man stood, looking after him. Then he turned and saw the young woman, standing near her pony, regarding him with grave eyes.

"Thank you," she said. He caught a flashing smile and then she was in the saddle, loping her pony down the street toward the station. For a moment the young man looked after her and then with a smile he returned to his suit cases and was off down the street toward the courthouse, which he saw in the distance.

CHAPTER II

THE RULE OF CATTLE

THE courthouse was a low, one-story red-brick building, sitting well back from the street. It was evidently newly built, for an accumulation of débris, left by the workmen, still littered the ground in the vicinity. A board walk led from the street to the wide, arched entrance. From the steps one could look down the street at the station and the other buildings squatting in the sunlight, dingy with the dust of many dry days. Except for the cowponies and the buckboard and the prairie schooner there was a total absence of life or movement, offering a striking contrast to the bustling cities to which the young man had been accustomed.

He walked rapidly down the board walk, entered the courthouse, and paused before a door upon which appeared the legend: "United States District Court. J. Blackstone Graney." The young man set his suit cases down, mopped his forehead with his handkerchief, making a wry face at the dust that appeared on the linen after his use of it, and then knocked lightly, but

firmly, on the door. A voice inside immediately admonished him to "come in." The young man smiled with satisfaction, turned the knob and opened the door, standing on the threshold. A man seated at one of the windows of the room was gazing steadily out at the vast, dry, sun-scorched country. He turned at the young man's entrance and got slowly to his feet, apparently waiting for the visitor to speak. He was a short man, not heavily, but stockily built, giving a clear impression of stolidity. Yet there was a certain gleam in his eyes that gave the lie to this impression, a gleam that warned of an active, analytical mind. Judicial dignity lurked all over him.

The young man bowed respectfully. "Are you Judge Graney?" he questioned.

The judge nodded and the young man smiled slightly. "I am Kent Hollis," he said.

The judge had been approaching a big table that stood in the center of the room and at the young man's words he took a second glance at him, but did not hesitate in his walk toward the table. However, he smiled when he reached it, sinking into a chair and motioning the young man to another.

"I have been expecting you," he said after he had become seated. "Take a chair." He

waited until the young man had drawn a chair opposite him and then he leaned over the table and stretched out his hand in greeting. "I'm glad to see you," he continued cordially. He held the young man's hand for an instant, peering steadily into the latter's unwavering eyes, apparently making a mental estimate of him. Then he dropped the hand and sat back, a half smile on his face. "You look like your father," he said.

The young man's face clouded. "Poor dad," he said slowly.

For a moment there was a silence; the judge studied the young man's face. Something that he saw in it must have pleased him, for he smiled, becoming serious instantly.

"I am sorry you could not get here in time," he said. "We buried your father yesterday."

"I couldn't make it," returned the young man regretfully. "I should have liked to see him before he died. Where did you bury him?"

"We took him out to his ranch—the Circle Bar," returned the judge, "where he said he wanted to be buried when he died. You'll find that the Circle Bar boys have done their best for him—which was little enough. Poor fellow, he deserved something better." He looked keenly at the young man.

Lines of pain came into the latter's face; he bowed his head, nodding at the Judge's words.

"I have always thought that it was his own fault," he said gently. "It might have been different." He looked slowly up at the judge, his face reddening with embarrassment. "Of course you know something of his life," he said. "You were his friend—he wrote me a while back, telling me that. I don't pretend to know what came between him and mother," he continued; "mother would never tell and father never mentioned it in his letters. I have thought it was drink," he added, watching the judge's face closely. He caught the latter's slight nod and his lips straightened. "Yes, it must have been drink," he continued; "I have inferred that from what mother has hinted now and then. But——" and a wistful gleam came into his eyes—"I have hoped that it would not be drink that would cause his——"

He caught the judge's slow, grave nod and he broke off abruptly, his eyes filling with an expression of resignation. "Well," he said, "it is ended, no matter what did it." He shoved back his chair. "I thank you for what you did for him," he added, rising; "I assure you that if it is possible for me to repay——"

"Sit down," said the judge, waving a hand to the young man's chair. "No thanks are due me. I did only what any friend would do for another. I have arranged for you to go out to the Circle Bar," he informed Hollis as the latter hesitated over resuming his chair. "Neil Norton, your range boss, is to be here at six o'clock with the buckboard." He consulted his watch. "He ought to be here in half an hour—if he is on time. Meantime there are some things I would like to say to you."

Hollis smiled. "Fire away," he directed.

The judge leaned his elbows on the table and narrowed his eyes at Hollis. "Don't think my questions impertinent," he said gravely, "for I assure you that nothing is further from my mind than a desire to pry into your affairs. But I take it you will need some advice—which, of course, you may disregard if you wish. I suppose you don't make a secret of your age?"

"No," was the instant reply, given with a grin, "I am twenty-six."

The judge smiled dryly. "We have great ambitions at twenty-six," he said. "I remember that at twenty-six I was rather determined on making the Supreme bench. You can see for yourself how far I missed it. I do not say that we never realize our ambitions," he added

quickly as he saw a flash light up the young man's eyes; "I merely wish to show that in my case they were rather extravagant." He grimaced, continuing with a smile: "You are a college man, of course—I can see that."

Hollis nodded. The judge continued, with an admiring glance at the young man's muscular frame and broad shoulders.

"Went in for athletics—football, and such?" he said. "Well," he added, catching the young man's nod, "it didn't hurt you a particle—it doesn't hurt anybody. Rather prepares a man for hard knocks—which he is sure to get sooner or later. If you have decided to live in this country you must expect hard knocks. And I presume you are going to live here?"

"That depends," returned Hollis. "If father has left his affairs in such shape that it is necessary for me to stay here and straighten them out, why of course I shall stay. Otherwise——" He hesitated and laughed quietly, continuing: "Well, I also have an ambition, and if I am compelled to remain here it will have to be sacrificed. It is a rather humble ambition compared to yours," he laughed. "It is journalism," he continued, suddenly serious; "I want to own a newspaper. I am city editor now and in a few years——" He laughed. "I am not

going to prophesy, but I have been working hard."

The judge's eyelashes flickered, but his face remained grave. "I am afraid that you will have to remain here. "That is"—he added dryly—"if you expect to realize anything from the property."

"I expect there can't be much property," observed Hollis.

The judge smiled. "A thousand acres of good grass land, some buildings, and"—here the judge's eyes gleamed and he drawled his words—"a newspaper."

Hollis sat erect. "A newspaper!" he gasped. "A newspaper in this country? Why, man, a newspaper——"

The judge laughed. "So you will not have to go back East in order to be able to realize your ambition—you can own a newspaper here—your father's newspaper—the Dry Bottom *Kicker*. It was quite a recent venture; I believe it appeared about a dozen times—intermittently. Ostensibly it was a weekly, but in reality it was printed at those times when your father's affliction sat least heavily upon him. He used to hire a compositor from Las Vegas to set the type,—a man named Potter—a worthless sort of fellow, but a genius in his way—when sober. 1

32 THE COMING OF THE LAW

suspect that much of the matter that went into the *Kicker* emanated from the brain of Dave Potter."

Hollis's smile revealed just a trace of derision. "You don't happen to know how father happened to think that a newspaper would pay—in this place?" he asked.

The judge looked at him meditatively, a gleam of quiet amusement in his eyes. "I don't remember to have said that the paper made any money for your father," he returned slowly; "nor do I remember hearing your father say that he expected it to make any money. As I understand the situation, your father founded the paper on principle. He expected to use it as a weapon."

"Please go on," urged Hollis. "That strikes me as a rather Quixotic proceeding."

"It was, rather," admitted the judge; "that is, it would seem Quixotic as viewed by an Eastern newspaper man. But out here people are apt to ignore money and methods in considering results. After you have been here a while you will be able to see the force and truth of that statement. Your father was after results and he seized upon the idea of founding a newspaper as a means by which to obtain them. And I feel certain that had he lived he would have succeeded."

“ I plead ignorance,” said Hollis, watching the judge closely. “ What particular result did my father desire? ”

Judge Graney’s eyes gleamed with earnestness. He leaned forward, speaking slowly and distinctly.

“ I am going to illustrate my point by giving you a brief history of your father’s experiences out here—as I had it from him. He came out here about fifteen years ago and took up a quarter-section of land over on Rabbit-Ear Creek, the present site of the Circle Bar ranch. For quite a few years he was a nester—as the small owner is called in this country, but he was unmolested for the reason that there were few large owners in the vicinity and each man was willing that his neighbor should succeed. Your father prospered and after a few years began to buy land. He finally acquired a thousand acres; he told me that at one time he had about five thousand head of cattle. Of course, these cattle could not live on your father’s thousand acres, but the ranges are free and the thousand acres answered very well as a headquarters.

“ Eight years ago some men in Santa Fe organized what is known as the Union County Cattlemen’s Association. This company secured a section of land adjoining your father’s property, on the other side of Rabbit-Ear Creek. The

company called its ranch the Circle Cross. Perhaps it strikes you as peculiar that the Association should have chosen a brand so closely resembling your father's. I will digress long enough to explain the action."

The judge drew out a pencil and picked up a piece of paper that lay near him on the desk, making some crude hieroglyphics and poising his pencil above them.

"Here," he explained, indicating a sketch which he had drawn, is the Circle Bar brand—a bar within a circle. And this—indicating another sketch,—is the Circle Cross—a cross within a circle. It is of course, perfectly obvious that all the Circle Cross company had to do when it desired to appropriate one of the Circle Bar cattle was to add a vertical bar to the Circle Bar brand and the brand became the Circle Cross. From a mechanical standpoint it was a very trifling operation, the manipulator of the brands having merely to apply the hot iron through a piece of wet blanket—that gives a new brand the appearance of age.

"To get back to the main subject. The new company called its ranch the Circle Cross and it erected new buildings within a few miles of the Circle Bar buildings. Not long after the advent of the new company it tried to buy the Circle

Bar, but your father refused to sell. Bill Dunlavey, the Circle Cross manager, attempted to negotiate the purchase of the Circle Bar and when he was met with refusal hard words passed between him and your father. Not long after that your father began to miss cattle—rustlers began a systematic attack upon his herds. Your father recognized this thievery as the work of the Cattlemen's Association and he fought back.

“A number of times he changed his brand, but each time the company checkmated him. To illustrate: Your father changed his brand to appear thus: The judge drew again on the paper. “That is the ‘Wine-Glass’ brand. You can see that it resembles a wine glass when held up vertically, though of course as it appeared on the Circle Bar cattle it lay on its side. But this move was futile, for among the Circle Cross cattle now appeared many branded with the sign of the ‘Hour-Glass,’ thus: The judge drew again. “This was achieved by merely adding a semi-circle to the wine-glass, closing over the bowl.

“As I have said your father altered his brand a good many times. But the Circle Bar cattle continued to disappear. Years of warfare followed. The Cattlemen's Association lost no opportunity to harass your father, or, for that mat-

36 *THE COMING OF THE LAW*

ter, all the other small owners in the vicinity. Desperate, dissolute men were imported from Texas and Arizona, men who took delight in the shedding of human blood. These men roamed the ranges, stealing the Circle Bar cattle and killing Circle Bar cowboys. Your father had trouble in keeping men; in order to surround himself with enough men to protect his cattle and resist the aggressions of Dunlavey's hired assassins he was forced to pay ruinous wages.

"Even then he could not prevent rustling. Dunlavey bribed his men; his herds dwindled; he saw that he was facing ruin if he did not devise some means to successfully cope with his enemies. He went over to Santa Fe to see the governor—a piffling carpet-bagger. He was told that the government was powerless; that the same condition existed all over the country, and that the government was unable to combat it. The Law had not come.

"Your father returned home, discouraged but not beaten. He approached the several other small owners in the vicinity, asking for co-operation and assistance. Fearful of Dunlavey's wrath, the small owners refused to organize. But your father decided to carry on the fight alone. He recognized the fact that nothing but the Law could defeat the association's aims, and he deter-

mined to force the Law into the Territory. With this end in view he established his newspaper. He succeeded in arousing public interest with the result that a court was established here."

The judge smiled dryly, continuing: "Yes, the Law is here. Or what is more to the point, a representative of the Law is here. 'I am the Law,' " he quoted, ironically. "But my hands are tied; this court is a mere travesty upon justice. The government at Washington has seen fit to send me here—alone. I can't go out and get evidence; I couldn't secure a conviction if I did. The people here who are not Dunlavey's friends were afraid of him. I can't get a jury. Dunlavey elects the sheriff—controls the election machinery. I am powerless—a mere figure-head. This is the situation in a nutshell. I could go into detail, but I imagine it is plain enough as it is."

Hollis's face had become gravely serious; his lips were straightened with an expression that hinted at the conflict that was going on in his mind.

"Isn't there an army post near?" he questioned.

"Over at Fort Union—a hundred miles or so southwest. I have pleaded for a detail, but have been informed that it can't be had; that the

soldiers are needed to keep the Indians in order. Independent cattlemen are supposed to fight it out alone. At least that is the inference, if we are to consider the attitude of the government.'"

Hollis was gravely silent. The judge leaned back in his chair, watching him with a queer expression. He realized that he had said enough to discourage the average young man from remaining in the country a moment longer than was absolutely necessary. He would not have been surprised had Hollis told him that he did not intend to remain. But from what he had seen of the young man he felt sure that his decision, when it did come, would be final. More than once since Hollis had been in the office had the judge observed the serene, steady gleam in his eyes, and he had catalogued him with the rare class of men whose mental balance is so perfect that nothing disturbs it. The judge had met a few such men in the West and he knew the type. As he sat looking at the young man he decided that Providence had made a mistake in allowing him to waste his time in the East. The West teemed with opportunities for men of his kind.

He was not surprised at Hollis's next question; it showed that he was considering the situation from many angles before committing himself.

“What is the condition of Circle Bar ranch at present?” he asked.

“The title to the land is intact and cannot be assailed. But Norton informs me that there are not above two hundred head of cattle on the range, and that the buildings are run down. Not a very cheerful prospect?”

He had told the truth about the land and the cattle, but he had purposely exaggerated concerning the condition of the buildings, being grimly determined to place the situation in its most unfavorable light that he might be the better able to test the young man's mettle. He smiled as Hollis thoughtfully stroked his chin.

“Well, now,” admitted the latter, flashing a queer smile at the judge, “I quite agree with you that the prospect isn't cheering. But so long as the condition is such as it is there is no need to grumble. I didn't come out here expecting to fall into a bed of roses.”

“Then you won't be disappointed,” returned the judge dryly. He filled and lighted a pipe, smoking meditatively, his eyes on the younger man with a curious expression. He had determined to push the test a little farther.

“You could probably sell the Circle Bar,” he said finally. “Your father told me before he died that he had been offered ten dollars an acre

for his land. That would total to a tidy sum."

Hollis looked quickly at the judge, his eyes flashing with grim amusement. "Would you advise me to sell?" he questioned.

The judge laughed quietly. "That is an unfair question," he equivocated, narrowing his eyes whimsically. "If I were heir to the property and felt that I did not care to assume the danger of managing it I should sell, without doubt. If, on the other hand, I had decided to continue my father's fight against an unscrupulous company, I would stay no matter what the consequences. But"—He puffed slowly at his pipe, his voice filling with unmistakable sarcasm—"it would be so much easier to sell and return at once to a more peaceful atmosphere. With ten thousand dollars you could go back East and go on with your newspaper work, well equipped, with a chance of realizing your ambition—and not be troubled with continuing a fight in which, no doubt, there would be many blows to be taken."

"Thank you," returned Hollis quietly. He looked steadily into the judge's eyes, his own glinting with a grim humor. "You have succeeded in making it very plain," he continued slowly. "But I am not going to run—I have decided on that. Of course I feel properly resentful over the way my father has been treated by this man Dunlavey and his association." His

eyes flashed with a peculiar hardness. "And I would stay here and fight Dunlavey and his parcel of ruffians if for no other reason than to secure revenge on personal grounds.

"But there is one other reason. There is a principle at stake. I don't care very much about the personal side of the question; little as I knew my father, I believe he would have ignored personalities were he confronted with the condition that confronts me. It is my belief that as an American citizen he chafed under conditions that prevented him from enjoying that freedom to which we are all entitled under the Constitution. Judging from your conversation you are in entire sympathy with that sentiment." He smiled at the judge. "Of course I am not mistaken?" he added.

The tobacco in the bowl of the judge's pipe spluttered; he brought his right fist heavily down upon the table, rattling the pens and ink bottles that littered its top. "No, young man; you are not mistaken—you have hit the nail squarely on the head. If you are going to stay here and fight Dunlavey and his crew, Blackstone Graney is with you until——"

"Until the Law comes," suggested Hollis.

"Yes, by thunder!" declared the judge. "You can go further than that and say: 'until the Law rules!'"

CHAPTER III

NORTON MAKES A DISCOVERY

JUDGE GRANEY rose and leaned over the table, taking the young man's hand and holding it tightly. Then he sat down again and resumed smoking. Neither man said a word during the hand-clasp and yet both knew that their hearts and minds were united in a common cause. Words would have been unnecessary and futile.

Hollis's path of duty lay straight and open before him. There was no by-way that would lead him around the dangers that were sure to beset him. Nor had he thought to search for any. Long before the judge had concluded his recital of conditions in the county Hollis had decided to meet the issue squarely. He had been able to see beyond the petty, personal side of the question; had even ignored it to get at the big, pithy principle of equal rights. The Law must come. If he could assist in bringing it he would be accomplishing something real and tangible

and he would be satisfied. He did not believe that Destiny had anything to do with his appearance upon the scene at this particular time; rather he felt that his coming was merely a result of a combination of circumstances such as might have occurred to any man. And like any man with courage and deeply settled convictions he was prepared to move forward to the issue, trusting himself. He had no thought of appearing heroic.

Yet to the judge he appeared so. The latter had been prepared to hear excuses from him; had been prepared to resist a natural inclination to berate the young man soundly for lack of parental loyalty, though conscious that he could advance no valid reason for the young man sacrificing himself upon the altars of an old feud. It was against human nature for any man to so sacrifice himself, he had assured himself when trying to build up a defense for the young man.

And now that Hollis had shown that he needed no defender; that he was willing to take up the cudgels in behalf of his father, the judge was scarcely able to restrain himself. To state calmly that he intended to fight the Cattlemen's Association when there was a life of comparative safety awaiting him in another section of the country was an heroic decision. Many another

man would have cringed—would have surrendered without striking a blow.

Judge Graney had long known that the action of his government in sending him to Union County was an ironical surrender on the part of the government to the forces in the West which had been long demanding the Law. He had been sent here, presumably to enforce the law, but in reality to silence the government's critics. He was not expected to convict anyone. Theoretically he was supposed to uphold the majesty of the law in Union County, but in reality he merely remained and drew his salary. There was no law to enforce.

In the fight that had been waged between the elder Hollis and the Cattlemen's Association his sympathies had been with Hollis, though he had never been able to assist him in a legal way. But the judge knew that eventually the Law must come, and so he encouraged Hollis, assuring him that victory would be his in the end.

And then Hollis had died—suddenly. The Las Vegas doctor who had attended him had shaken his head sagely when the judge had questioned him regarding his patient and had pointed significantly to one of Dry Bottom's saloons. The doctor had told the judge there was no hope, and the latter had telegraphed East. The appearance of young Hollis had been the result.

The judge's heart had warmed toward the young man.

"What are your intentions regarding the newspaper—the *Kicker*?" he questioned.

Hollis looked up quickly, his face grave. "Perhaps if there had been no *Kicker* here my decision might have been different," he said. "But so long as it is here it is in business to stay!"

"I expect that decision won't please Dunlavey a whole lot," the judge returned.

"Perhaps not," drawled Hollis; "still, we can't aim to please everybody. I expect I might be able to get hold of that printer—Potter I believe you called him?"

"Potter won't be hard to find," assured the judge; "a search of the saloons would uncover him, I imagine." He smiled. "When you get ready to get the *Kicker* out just let me know; I promise to have Potter on hand."

To the ears of the two men came a rattle of wheels and a voice. The judge leaned back in his chair and looked out through the window. His face wreathed into a broad smile as he resumed his former position and looked at Hollis. "Your range boss is here," he said.

They heard a step on the board walk, and a man stood in the doorway looking at them.

The newcomer gave an instant impression of

capability. He stood on the threshold, entirely composed, saturnine, serene eyed, absolutely sure of himself. He was arrayed in high heeled boots, minus spurs; the bottoms of a pair of dust-covered overalls were tucked into the boot legs; a woolen shirt, open at the throat, covered a pair of admirable shoulders; a scarlet handkerchief was knotted around his neck; and a wide brimmed hat, carelessly dented in the crown, was shoved rakishly back from his forehead. Sagging from his slim waist was a well filled cartridge belt and at the right hip a heavy revolver.

"Howdy, judge!" he said with a smile, in response to Judge Graney's cordial greeting.

"Just come in?" questioned the judge.

"Been in town an hour," returned Norton.

He flashed a searching glance at Hollis, which that young man met steadily. The thought crossed Hollis's mind that the buckboard that he had seen in front of a store soon after leaving the station must have been Norton's. But now Norton was speaking again and Hollis listened.

"Dropped into the Fashion to see my friend Red Eggers," resumed Norton, smiling broadly. "Same old crowd—Dunlavey, Yuma Ed, Ten Spot, Greasy—most of the bunch which has been makin' things interestin' for us hereabouts."

At the mention of "Yuma Ed" Hollis looked

up. That was the name of the second man he had struck in the affair near the Fashion Saloon. He wondered if Norton knew. He did not remember to have seen the latter among the men who had surrounded him in the space between the two buildings. But the judge was now introducing him to Norton and he stood up, holding the latter's hand and meeting his inspecting gaze fairly. He found that the range boss was fully as tall as he; indeed, Hollis discovered that he was compelled to look up slightly in order to meet the latter's level gaze. Norton smiled peculiarly; there was a friendly expression in his eyes, but mingled with it was a reserved, appraising, speculative gleam, which drew a smile to Hollis's lips.

"So you're Jim Hollis's boy?" said Norton. "My new boss?" He grinned, evidently willing to go more than half way in forming a friendship with his "new boss". "I don't reckon that you're much stuck on this here country—much as you've seen of it?"

"I've been used to keeping busy," laughed Hollis, "and my impression is that it seems rather dull out here."

Norton's eyelashes flickered. He deliberately closed one eye at the judge, carefully averting his face so that Hollis could not see.

“So you’re lookin’ for action?” he said to Hollis in a grave voice. “Mebbe it ain’t none of my business,” he added, his eyes gleaming, “but I’m askin’ you if you’re thinkin’ to stay in this country—keepin’ your dad’s ranch an’ his newspaper?”

Hollis nodded. Norton’s eyes gleamed with a savage delight. “Bully!” he declared. “If you stay here you’ll get plenty of action. I was afraid you wouldn’t stay.” He turned to Judge Graney, a grin of satisfaction on his face. “I’m tellin’ you somethin’ that will tickle you a heap,” he said. “I told you that I had stopped in Red Egger’s saloon. I did. Dunlavey’s bunch was feelin’ mighty sore over somethin’. I stayed there a while, tryin’ to find out what it was all about, but there wasn’t none of them sayin’ anything to me. But pretty soon I got Red over into a corner an’ he told me. Accordin’ to him Dunlavey had corraled that Hazelton girl outside an’ was tellin’ her somethin’ pretty strong when a tenderfoot, which hadn’t any regard for Dunlavey’s delicate feelin’s, up an’ lambasted him in the jaw!”

“Struck him?” queried the judge, grinning delightedly.

“Knocked him cold,” affirmed Norton, his eyes dancing. “Pasted him so hard that he thought it was night an’ went to sleep. Then Yuma

busted in an' thought to work his guns. He got his'n, too. That there tenderfoot didn't have no respect for guns. Red says he never thought any man could hit so hard. It must have been sumptuous!" He laughed delightedly. "I'd like to shake hands with that tenderfoot—he's my friend!"

Hollis pulled out a cigar case, selected a cigar, lighted it, and smoked in silence.

So her name was Hazelton. Admiration over the manner in which she had held the men at bay before Dunlavey got to his feet still lingered; she had impressed him deeply. But a deeper satisfaction overshadowed his thoughts of the girl, for he had slugged Dunlavey, his father's enemy. His satisfaction grew to amusement. Did Dunlavey know who had slugged him? He must have suspected, for Hollis recalled the man's significant expression when, after he had risen from the ground he said: "I've got an idea that you an' me will meet again."

Hollis's thoughts flitted rapidly from Dunlavey to the girl. Now that he had decided to stay he had determined to search her out. He remembered that Dunlavey had spoken slightly of her brother and he assured himself that he would not be entirely satisfied until he had uncovered the mystery. He might have ques-

tioned Norton or the judge, for both men evidently knew the girl, but he was reluctant to betray his interest in her to either man.

He heard Norton make an exclamation of surprise, and looking up he saw him holding his right hand out, the palm upward, examining it. There was a splotch of blood on the palm and another on the under side of the thumb.

“Shucks!” Norton was saying. “Now where in thunder did I get that?” He looked again at the hand and then suddenly dove forward to Hollis’s side, seized his right hand, peered at the knuckles and held the hand triumphantly aloft.

“I reckon this is where I got it!” he grinned.

Hollis looked ruefully down at his knuckles. The skin was gashed—evidently where it had come in contact with a bone in either Dunlavey’s or Yuma’s jaw. He had intended to keep the story of adventure to himself. But he saw that Norton had stepped back and was gazing soberly at the suitcases, which Hollis had deposited near the door. Norton suddenly let out a chirp of delight.

“Two of them!” he said, suppressing his excitement; “Two grips! Red Eggers said there was two an’ that the tenderfoot had come down

toward the court house!" He walked to Hollis and halted in front of him, looking at him with admiration and satisfaction.

"Own up now!" he said. "You ain't tellin' us that it wasn't you, durn you! Oh, say!" He uttered a whoop that must have startled the horses in front of the building. Then he sobered down, speaking in a low, regretful voice: "You durn tenderfoot! Here I've been waitin' for years to get a crack at that big four-flusher, an' here you come, a-fannin' along from your little old East an' get ahead of me!" He stifled a cackle of mirth. "An' so you're lookin' for action? Lordy! If you don't call what you done to Dunlavey an' Yuma action this country's goin' to set up an' take notice when you get to goin' in earnest!"

Judge Graney loomed somberly over the table. "I suppose it must have been you?" he said gravely.

Hollis nodded. "I may as well confess," he said. "I saw a man giving a young lady a mighty bad moment and I slugged him. Another man called me a vile name and I slugged him, too. That was all."

The judge sat down again, his face slightly pale. A significant glance passed between him and Norton, but the latter laughed grimly.

“I reckon he’s opened the ball, right off the reel,” he suggested.

Judge Graney drew a deep breath. “Yes,” he returned. “I suppose that way is as good as any other. It was bound to come anyway. It will be war to the finish now!”

CHAPTER IV

AT THE CIRCLE BAR

IN the two weeks that followed his arrival at Dry Bottom, Hollis had much time to meditate upon the great change that had come into his life. His conclusion that there was nothing in common between cattle raising and journalism was not a result of an involved process of reasoning, and had he not been endowed with a sense of humor he might have become embittered. Though a sacrifice be made cheerfully, there lingers always its ghost to draw mental pictures of "what might have been." Hollis would have been more than human had he not felt some little regret over his sacrifice.

It had seemed to him, as two weeks before he had ridden away from the court house—sitting on the seat of the buckboard beside Neil Norton, his suitcases tucked snugly away underneath—that he was once and for all severing his connection with the big, bustling world in which he had moved; in whose busy scenes he had been so vitally interested. His had been a big work;

seated at his desk in the "city" room of his newspaper he had many times likened himself unto an argus-eyed recording angel whose business it was to keep in view each of the many atoms of a busy multitude and to accord to them that amount of space that their importance seemed to demand. He had loved his work; it had broadened him, had provided him with exactly the proportion of mental exercise needed to keep him on edge and in a position to enjoy life. He had lived in the East—really lived. Out here he would merely exist, though, he assured himself grimly, his enemies would have to pay dearly for his sacrifice.

The picture of his journey to the Circle Bar ranch was still fresh in his mind as he rode slowly away from Neil Norton, whom he had left sitting in his saddle on a ridge, watching him. The long twilight had brought its lengthening shadows that night before Norton had struck the Circle Bar trail, and before they had traveled a mile of the ten that lay before them night had come. Hollis had been little inclined to talk and Norton did not disturb him, but gave his attention to the horses. There had been no moon and few stars, and darkness, as under a blanket, had settled over them before they were many miles from Dry Bottom.

The country seemed nothing more than a vast

plain, broken here and there by ridges and depressions. Occasionally a low hill loomed out of the darkness, the shadows deepening around it; now and then the buckboard passed through a draw, the wheels sinking hub-deep in the loose sand. Several dry arroyos crossed the trail, but with a knowledge that seemed almost marvelous Norton cleverly avoided these pitfalls. Hollis could not see a foot ahead, but the location of the trail seemed to be no mystery to the range boss, for he drove the horses steadily on, hesitating for nothing.

Once during the ride Norton broke the silence with a subdued cackle of mirth, and at another time he laughed aloud.

"I'd liked to have seen Big Bill when you hit him!" he observed, regret in his voice. "I reckon he might have been just a little surprised!"

To which Hollis made no reply. At another time Norton broke the silence long enough to inquire:

"I reckon mebbe you wouldn't have hit him so hard if you'd knowed who he was?"

"I think I should have hit a little harder," returned Hollis quietly.

"Why, hell!" declared Norton with a laugh; "I reckon you would have done just that!"

About ten o'clock they came in sight of some straggling posts, and Norton assured Hollis that the posts were strung with wire, forming a fence which skirted one side of the Circle Bar pasture. A few minutes later a dog barked and at Norton's call came bounding up to the buckboard, yipping joyously. Hollis could make out his shape as he cavorted about.

"My dog," offered the range boss. "Half wolf, the other half just dog." He chuckled over his joke. "Best dog you ever see," he boasted; "money couldn't buy him. Like dogs?"

Hollis nodded and then realizing that Norton could not see him in the darkness, voiced a quick "yes".

In the distance Hollis saw a sudden square of light illuminate the wall of darkness into which they had been driving; a door had been opened. Evidently the dog's barking had aroused the inmates of the building, for as the buckboard drew nearer Hollis saw several figures flit out of the door-way. Norton drove the horses close to the building and brought them to a halt with a sonorous "whoa"! Then he turned to Hollis and spoke with a drawl: "This here building is the Circle Bar bunkhouse; them's some of your men."

Hollis remarked the size of the building and Norton laughed grimly. "There was a time

when it wasn't any too big," he said. "Five years ago your dad had twenty-seven men on the pay-roll. If Dunlavey an' his damn association hadn't showed up he'd have had them yet." He turned toward three men who were lounging in the doorway.—"Hey, you guys!" he yelled; "this here's your new boss. If you-all ain't glued there you might grab his grips an' tote them up to the ranchhouse. Tell the missus that I'll be along directly with the boss."

Amusement over the Southern twang that marked Norton's speech filled Hollis. He had noticed it before and it had made plain to him the reason of Norton's unhurried movements, his slow humor, his habit of quiet scrutiny.

But he had little time for reflection. At Norton's words two men sprang forward to the buckboard and he saw his suitcases disappear into the darkness in the direction of a light that he now saw flickering from some little distance. He jumped out of the buckboard and saw another man spring to the horses' heads and lead them away into the darkness. Then he followed Norton into the light from the open doorway. Presently he was shaking hands with a man who stood there, whose chief articles of raiment were overalls, boots, and a woolen shirt. Almost instantly, it seemed, two of the others had returned

and Norton was introducing them as "Ace," "Lanky," and "Weary." These pseudonyms were picturesque and descriptive, though at the time Hollis was in a state of pained incomprehension concerning them. Later he was informed that Ace had been so named on account of having once been caught slipping a playing card of that character into his bootleg during a game of poker. Incidentally—Hollis was told—gun-play had resulted. That Ace was still active proved that the other man might have profited by keeping his knowledge to himself. Obviously, Lanky deserved his appellation—he was a trifle over six feet tall and proportioned like a young sapling. Weary had been born tired—so Hollis was told by the latter's defamers; defamers, for later Hollis discovered that no man in the outfit could show more surprising agility on occasion than this same Weary.

Hollis found himself inside the bunkhouse, where he was critically inspected by the three men—and before he left, by the fourth, who answered to the name of "Bud." Norton told him that these four comprised his outfit—Bud acting as blacksmith. Hollis remained with the men only long enough to announce that there would be no change; that he intended to hang on and fight for his rights. When Norton told them

that Hollis had already begun the fight by slugging Dunlavey and Yuma Ed, the enthusiasm of the four men was unbounded. They assured him profanely that they were with him to the "finish"—whatever it might be. After which Hollis departed to the ranchhouse.

He found Mrs. Norton to be a pleasant faced woman of twenty-seven or eight, who had—according to Norton—"bossed him for seven years." Norton grinned hugely over his wife's embarrassed protest.

"I haven't 'bossed' him," she told Hollis, while Norton looked on with amusement, "though there have been times when he richly deserved it." There was a spirited flash in the lady's eyes as she looked at her lord.

"I don't wish to take sides in any marital controversy," Hollis told them. "I don't care to parade my ignorance. However," he smiled, with a wink at Norton, "most men need a boss, if for no other reason than to teach them the value of discipline."

"There!" said Mrs. Norton with a triumphant laugh, and immediately left the two men and went into the kitchen.

After partaking of a hearty meal Hollis and Norton went out on the porch for a smoke and a talk, and it was near midnight when Hollis

tumbled into bed, distinctly pleased with the range boss and his admirable wife. He was asleep within five minutes.

The sun was streaming into his window when he hopped out of bed the next morning, refreshed and eager to make a trip of inspection over his property. He came down stairs lightly, in the hope of being able to slip outside without disturbing anybody, but upon opening the stair door he was surprised to find the cloth on the table in the dining room already spread and hot food steaming upon it. Mrs. Norton was bustling about from the kitchen to the dining room. Evidently the Nortons had been astir for hours.

Mrs. Norton smilingly directed him to a wash basin on a bench just outside the door and stood in the opening a moment, watching him as he drenched his face with the cold water. There was in her manner only the solicitous concern of the hostess whose desire is to place a guest at ease. Hollis decided that Norton had been most fortunate in his choice of a "boss."

"Neil has gone down into the big basin to look after the men," she told him from the doorway. "I don't expect him to return for some little time. Come in to breakfast when you are ready."

To his protest that he would wait until Nor-

ton's return before breakfasting she replied with a smile that her husband had already breakfasted, telling him also that in this part of the country everyone rose with the sun.

He stood on the edge of the porch for a moment after washing, drinking in the air that came to him from the plains—a breeze laden with the clear aroma of the sage-brush moist with the dew of the night. When he entered the house Mrs. Norton was nowhere to be seen and he drew up a chair and breakfasted alone.

A little later he embarked upon a tour of inspection. All of the buildings, with the exception of the ranchhouse, which was constructed of logs, with a gable roof and plastered interstices—were built of adobe, low, squat structures with flat roofs. There were six of them—the bunkhouse, mess house, blacksmith shop, the range boss's private shack (from which Norton and his wife had removed after the death of the elder Hollis), the stable, and one other building for the storing of miscellaneous articles. Hollis inspected them all and was not quite convinced that they had reached the stage of dilapidation suggested by Judge Graney.

During his inspection Hollis had seen a patch of garden, some chickens, and down in a small pasture some cows that he supposed were kept

for milking. He was leaning on the top rail of the corral fence after he had concluded his trip of inspection when he heard a clatter of hoofs behind him and turned to observe Norton, just riding up to the corral gate. The range boss wore a grin of pleasure.

“How you findin’ things?” he questioned.

“In better shape than I expected—after listening to Judge Graney,” smiled Hollis.

Norton looked critically at him. “Then you ain’t changed your mind about stayin’ here?” he inquired.

“No,” returned Hollis; “I believe I shall get used to it in time.”

Norton dismounted, his eyes alight with satisfaction. “That’s the stuff!” he declared. He threw the reins over his pony’s head and seized Hollis by an arm. “Come along with me—down to my shack,” he said; “I’ve got somethin’ to show you.”

Without further words he led Hollis toward a building—the one he had occupied previous to the death of the elder Hollis. There were three rooms in the building and in the front one were several articles of furniture and some boxes. One of these boxes Norton opened, taking therefrom several articles of wearing apparel, consisting of a pair of corduroy trousers, a pair of

leathern chaps, boots, spurs, two woolen shirts, a blue neckerchief, a broad felt hat, and last, with a grin of amusement over Hollis's astonished expression, a cartridge belt to which was attached a holster containing a Colt .45.

"I bought this outfit over at Santa Fé two months ago," he informed Hollis, who was gravely contemplating the lay-out, "expectin' to wear them myself some day. But when I got home I found they didn't quite fit." He surveyed Hollis with a critical eye. "I've been thinkin' ever since you come that you'd fit pretty snug in them." He raised a protesting hand as Hollis was about to speak. "I ain't givin' them to you," he grinned. "But you can't wear no tenderfoot clothes out here. Some day when we're together an' we've got time you can blow me to another outfit; I won't hesitate about takin' it." He leaned over and tapped the butt of the Colt. "You ever handle one of them?" he questioned.

Hollis nodded. Once during a shooting tournament he had done good work with a pistol. But Norton laughed at his nod.

"Mebbe we do it a little different out here," he smiled. "You hop into them duds an' we'll go out into the cottonwood yonder an' try out your gun." He pointed through the door to a

small clump of cottonwoods beyond the bunk-house.

He went out and fifteen minutes later Hollis joined him, looking thoroughly at home in his picturesque rigging. An hour later they returned to the corral fence, where Norton caught up his pony and another, saddling the latter for Hollis. He commented briefly upon the new owner's ability with the six-shooter.

"You use your fists a little better than you use a gun," he remarked with his peculiar drawl, "but I reckon that on the whole you'll be able to take care of yourself—after you've had a little practise gettin' your gun out." He laughed with a grim humor. "More men have been killed in this country on account of bein' slow on the draw than for any other reason. Don't never monkey with it unless you intend to use it, an' then see that you get it out middlin' rapid. That's the recipe," he advised.

The pony that he had selected for Hollis was a slant-eyed beast, larger than the average, with rangy limbs, black in color with a white muzzle and fetlocks. Hollis voted him a "beaut" after he had ridden him a mile or two and found that he had an easy, steady stride.

Together they made a round of the basin, returning to the ranchhouse for dinner. Hollis

was saddle weary and when Norton proposed another trip during the afternoon he was met with the response that the new owner purposed enjoying the cool of the ranchhouse porch for the remainder of the day.

The next morning Hollis was up with the dawn and out on the porch splashing water over his face from the wash basin that stood outside the door. For a long time after washing he stood on the porch, looking out over the big basin at this new and strange world. Endless it seemed, lying before him in its solemn silence; a world of peace, of eternal sunlight, smiling skies, and infinite distance. It seemed unreal to him. Did this same planet hold the busy cities to which he had been accustomed? The stuffy room, with its smell of damp ink, its litter of papers—his room in the newspaper offices, filled with desks and the clatter of typewriters? Through whose windows came the incessant clamor that welled up from the streets below? He laughed at the thought and turned to see Norton standing in the doorway looking at him with a smile.

“Comparin’ her with your little old East?” inquired the latter.

Hollis confessed that he had been doing something of that sort.

“Well,” returned Norton, “there ain’t any

way to compare this country with anything else. Seems as though when the world was made the Lord had a few million miles left which he didn't know what to do with an' so he just dumped it down out here. An' then, havin' business somewhere else about that time he forgot about it an' left it to get along as best it could—which wasn't none too rapid."

This conversation had taken place just twelve days ago, yet Norton's words still remained fresh in Hollis's mind. Yet he did not altogether agree with Norton. The West had impressed him far more than he cared to admit.

This morning, directly after breakfast Hollis and Norton had saddled their horses and ridden out of the basin toward the river, into a section of the country that Hollis had not yet explored. Emerging from the basin, they came to a long, high ridge. On its crest Norton halted. Hollis likewise drew in his pony. From here they could see a great stretch of country, sweeping away into the basin beneath it, toward a mountain range whose peaks rose barren and smooth in the white sunlight.

"This here's 'Razor-Back' ridge," explained Norton as the ponies halted; "called that on account of bein' so unusually narrow on the top." He pointed to some buildings which Hollis had seen but to which he had given very little atten-

tion, thinking they were those of the Circle Bar. "Them's the Circle Cross buildings," resumed Norton. "They're about three miles from the Circle Bar ranchhouse, directly north through that cottonwood back of the bunkhouse where you tried your gun the day after you come out here. Down below there—where you see them two big cottonwood trees—is 'Big Elk' crossin'. There's another somethin' like it back up the crick a ways, on the other side of the ranchhouse, called the 'Narrows.'" He laughed grimly. "But we don't use them crossins' much—they're dead lines; generally you'll find there's a Circle Cross man or so hangin' around them—with a rifle. So it don't pay to go monkeyin' around there unless you've got pressin' business."

He made a grimace. "It's my opinion that a good many Circle Bar cattle have crossed the crick in them two places—never to come back." He swept a hand up the river, indicating the sentinel like buttes that frowned above the bed of the stream. "The crick is pretty shallow," he continued, "but Big Elk an' the Narrows are the only two places where a man can cross in safety—if we consider that there wouldn't be any Circle Cross man hangin' around them two places. But there ain't no other place to cross an' so we don't go on the other side much."

He turned to Hollis, looking at him with a

quaint smile. "From here you can see everything that amounts to anything in this section—which ain't a heap. Of course over there are some mountains—where we was a few days ago lookin' up the boys"—he pointed to some serrated peaks that rose somberly in the southwestern distance—"but as you saw there ain't much to them except rocks an' lava beds. There's some hills there"—pointing to the south—"but there ain't nothin' to see in them. They look a heap better from here than they do when you get close to them. That's the way with lots of things, ain't it?"

Hollis smiled. "I like it," he said quietly, "much better than I did when I came." He turned to Norton with a whimsical smile. "I suppose it will strike you as peculiar, but I've got a notion that I would like to ride around a while alone. I don't mean that I don't like your company, for I do. But the notion has just struck me."

Norton laughed indulgently. "I reckon I won't consider that you're trying to slight me," he returned. "I know exactly how you feel; that sort of thing comes over everybody who comes to this country—sooner or later. Generally it's later, when a man has got used to the silence an' the bigness an' so on. But in your

case it's sooner. You'll have to have it out with yourself."

His voice grew serious. "But don't go ridin' too far. An' keep away from the river trail."

In spite of his ready acquiescence he sat for some time on his pony, watching Hollis as the latter urged his pony along the ridge. Just before Hollis disappeared down the slope of the ridge he turned and waved a hand to Norton, and the latter, with a grim, admiring smile, wheeled his pony and loped it over the back trail.

Once down the slope of the ridge Hollis urged his pony out into the level of the basin, through some deep saccatone grass, keeping well away from the river trail as advised by the range boss.

In spite of his serious thoughts Hollis had not been dismayed over the prospect of remaining at the Circle Bar to fight Dunlavey and his crew. He rather loved a fight; the thought of clashing with an opposing force had always filled him with a sensation of indefinable exultation. He reveled in the primitive passions. He had been endowed by nature with those mental and physical qualities that combine to produce the perfect fighter. He was six feet of brawn and muscle; not an ounce of superfluous flesh encumbered him—he had been hammered and hardened into a state of physical perfection by several years of

athletic training, sensible living, and good, 'hard, healthy labor. Circumstances had not permitted him to live a life of ease. The trouble between his parents—which had always been much of a mystery to him—had forced him at a tender age to go out into the world and fight for existence. It had toughened him; it had trained his mind through experience; it had given him poise, persistence, tenacity—those rare mental qualities without which man seldom rises above mediocrity.

Before leaving Dry Bottom to come to the Circle Bar he had telegraphed his mother that he would be forced to remain indefinitely in the West, and the sending of this telegram had committed him irrevocably to his sacrifice. He knew that when his mother received a letter from him explaining the nature of the work that required his presence in Dry Bottom she would approve his course. At least he was certain that she would not advise surrendering.

After riding for more than an hour he came to a shallow draw and urged his pony through the deep sand of its center. On the other side of the draw the country became suddenly rocky; great boulders were strewn indiscriminately about, as though some giant hand had distributed them carelessly, without regard to their final resting place. A lava bed, looming gray and dead under

a barren rock hill, caught his attention, and he drew his pony to a halt and sat quietly in the saddle examining it. From the lava bed his gaze went to a weird mineral shape that rose in the distance—an inverted cone that seemed perfectly balanced on its narrowest point. He studied this long without moving, struck with the miraculous stability of the thing; it seemed that a slight touch would send it tumbling down.

He realized that he had stumbled upon a spot that would have provided pleasure to a geological student. To him it was merely a source of wonder and awe. Some mighty upheaval of nature had created this, and he continued to gaze at it, his mind full of conjecture.

To his right rose a precipitous rock wall surmounted by a fringe of thick shrubbery. On the left was another wall, perpendicular, flat on its top and stretching away into the distance, forming a grass plateau. Directly in front of him was a narrow canyon through which he could see a plain that stretched away into the unknown distance.

It was a magnificent country; he did not now regret his decision to remain here. He pulled out his watch, noting that its hands pointed to ten, and realized that he must be off if he expected to reach the Circle Bar by noon.

He sat erect in the saddle, about to wheel his pony toward the draw through which he had entered, when he heard a sharp sound. Startled, he glanced swiftly to his right, searching the immediate vicinity for the agency which had created sound in this vast silence. He stiffened slowly in the saddle, his face gradually paling. Not over a hundred feet from him, partly concealed by a big boulder, stood a man with a rifle, the muzzle of the weapon trained fairly on him.

CHAPTER V

THE GIRL OF DRY BOTTOM

HOLLIS was not frightened, though he was in a position that might have aroused fear or apprehension in any man's mind. He was alone, the man had him covered with the rifle, and assuredly this was one of Dunlavey's hirelings.

Hollis glanced swiftly around. Certain signs—some shrubbery that he saw through the canyon, a bald butte or two rising in the distance—told him that he was near the river. And Norton had told him to keep away from the river trail. In his eagerness to explore the country he had forgotten all about Norton's warning.

The prospect was not a hopeful one, yet Hollis could not have admitted to feeling any alarm. He realized that had the man intended any immediate harm he would have shot him down long before this—while he had sat motionless in the saddle inspecting the place. Concerning the man's intentions he could only speculate, but assuredly they were not peaceful.

74 *THE COMING OF THE LAW*

For a little time the man remained motionless and Hollis sat quiet, looking at him. The weapon had not moved; its muzzle still menaced him and he watched it closely, wondering whether the man would give him any warning when about to pull the trigger.

Many minutes dragged and the man did not move. A slow anger began to steal over Hollis; the man's inaction grated on his nerves.

"Well!" he challenged sharply. "What do you want?"

There was no answer. Hollis could see only the man's head and shoulders projecting above the boulder, and the rifle—steady and level—menacing him. With an exclamation of rage and disdain he seized the bridle rein and pulled sharply on it, swinging the pony's head around. The rifle crashed venomously; Hollis felt the right sleeve of his shirt flutter, and he pulled the pony abruptly up.

"Just to show you!" came the man's voice, mockingly. "If you move again until I give the word you won't know where you've been hit!"

Hollis was satisfied—the man undoubtedly meant business. He settled back into the saddle and looked down at his shirt sleeve. The bullet had passed very close to the arm. If the man

had meant the bullet for that particular spot he was a deadly marksman. In the face of such marvelous shooting Hollis did not care to experiment further. But his anger had not yet abated.

“No doubt you are enjoying yourself!” he said with bitter sarcasm. “But the pleasure is all yours. I am not enjoying myself a bit, I assure you. And I don’t like the idea of being a target for you to shoot at!”

A laugh came back to Hollis—a strange, unnatural, sardonic cackle that, in spite of his self-control, caused his flesh to creep. And then the man’s voice:

“No, you don’t like it. I knew that all along. But you’re going to stay here for seven weeks while I shoot holes in you!” He laughed again, his voice high and shrill, its cackling cadences filling the place.

“Seven weeks in Devil’s Hollow!” came the voice again. “Seven weeks! Seven weeks!”

Hollis felt his heart thumping heavily against his ribs, while a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach told him that his courage was touched. He realized now why the man had not shot him down immediately. He was a maniac!

For a few terrible seconds Hollis sat in the saddle while the world reeled around him; while the rocks and cliffs danced fantastically. Cour-

age he had to be sure; he had already become resigned to death before the man's rifle, but he had imagined the man to be in full possession of his senses; imagined his death to have been planned out of the deliberate coolness of reason. Such a death would have been bad enough, but to meet death at the hands of a man mentally unbalanced! Somehow it seemed different, seemed horribly unreal—like a terrible nightmare.

It was some seconds before he regained control of himself, and then he steadied himself in the saddle, assuring himself in a burst of bitter, ironic humor that death at the hands of a crazy man could be no worse than death at the hands of a rational one.

He looked up again, a defiant smile on his lips, to see that both man and rifle had disappeared. In a flash he saw his chance and took advantage of it. In an instant he was off his pony; in another he was behind a convenient rock, breathing easier, his senses alert. For some little time he remained in the shelter of the rock, awaiting the other man's movements. He did not doubt that acting upon some freakish impulse, the man had left his boulder and was even now stalking him from some other direction. He peered carefully about him. He had no thought of shooting the man—that would be murder, for the man was not

mentally responsible for his actions. His efforts must be centered solely upon some plan for saving his own life.

To do this he realized that he must be careful. In view of the man's unerring marksmanship it would be certain death for him to expose himself for an instant. But he must take some chances. Convinced of this he peered around the edge of his rock, taking a flashing glance around him. The man was nowhere to be seen. Hollis waited some little time and then taking another glance and not seeing the man, rose slowly to his feet and crouched. Then, filled with a sudden, reckless impulse, he sprang for another rock a dozen feet distant, expecting each instant to hear the crash of the man's rifle. But he succeeded in gaining the shelter of the other rock intact. Evidently the man was looking for him in some other direction.

Emboldened with his success he grimly determined on advancing to another rock some twenty or thirty feet farther on. As in the first instance he succeeded in gaining it in safety. His maneuvering had been circuitous, bringing him into a position from which he could see partly behind the rock where the man had been concealed.

And now, having gained the second rock in

safety, Hollis decided to take no more chances. Sooner or later, he was convinced, the man was sure to see him as he jumped. He did not like the picture that his imagination conjured up. Therefore his actions were now marked with more caution. It took him a long time to gain a position where he could peer over the upper edge of the rock behind which he was concealed. But he gained it finally and then dropped back with an exclamation of surprise. He had caught a glimpse of the man. He was lying face upward behind the boulder, his arms outstretched, his rifle lying in the dust near him.

Hollis was tempted to make a run for his pony, mount, and race out of the hollow. But a second thought restrained him. He had considered the man's action merely a ruse, but why should he attempt it after he had once had an opportunity to make use of his rifle? Still for an instant Hollis hesitated, for he knew there was no rule by which a maniac's actions might be judged. Then with a grim laugh he sprang over the few feet that separated him from the man, approaching him carefully, still slightly doubtful.

But the man was not shamming; Hollis could see that when he had approached close enough to see his face. It bore a curious pallor, his eyes were wide open and staring, and some foam

flecked his lips. Evidently he had been overcome by a paroxysm of his malady at about the moment Hollis had discovered it.

Hollis stepped back and heaved a sigh of relief. Then he stepped over to where the man's rifle lay, taking it up and removing the cartridges. Returning to the man he removed the cartridges from his belt and drew his six-shooter from its holster, determined that when the man recovered from his stupor there would be no danger of a recurrence of the previous incident. Then he leaned against the boulder to await the man's recovery.

Ten minutes later, while he still watched the man, he heard a clatter of hoofs. Determined not to be taken by surprise again he drew his own six-shooter and peered cautiously around the edge of the boulder. What he saw caused him to jam the weapon back into its holster very hurriedly. Then he stepped out of his concealment with a red, embarrassed face to greet a young woman whose expression of doubt and fear was instantly replaced by one of pleasure and recognition as she caught sight of him. It was the girl of Dry Bottom.

"Oh!" she said. "Is it you? I was afraid——" And then she saw the man and was off her pony in a flash and at his head, sup-

porting it and pouring something down his throat from a bottle.

She rose presently, embarrassment crimsoning her face. Hollis saw her lips quiver when she turned and spoke to him.

"He will be all right—now," she said, facing Hollis, her eyes drooping as though ashamed to meet his. "He has had another attack of his—his trouble." She looked suddenly up at Hollis, bravely trying to repress her emotion—but with little success.

"You heard what he—Big Bill Dunlavey—said about my brother?" she questioned, her eyes full and moist. Hollis nodded and she continued rapidly, her voice quavering: "Well, he told the truth." Her voice trailed away into a pitiful wail, and she stepped over and leaned against the boulder, sobbing quietly into her hands. "That's why it hurts so," she added.

Hollis yielded to a sudden wave of sympathy. He stood close to her, aware of his inability to cope with this strange situation. She looked so small, so out of place, he felt that whatever he did or said would not help matters. What he did say, however, assisted in restoring her composure.

"I am glad I slugged him!" he said heatedly.

She turned suddenly to him, her eyes flashing spiritedly through the moisture in them.

"Oh, it was great!" she declared, her hands clenching at the recollection. "I could have shaken hands with you—with the hand that struck him!"

Hollis smiled whimsically. "I've still got the hand," he said significantly, extending it toward her—"if you have not reconsidered." He laughed as she took it and pressed it firmly. "I rather think that we've both got a shake coming on that," he added. "I didn't understand then about your brother or I would have added a few extra pounds to that punch."

Her face clouded as he mentioned her brother. "Poor Ed," she said in a low voice. She went over to the man, leaning over him and smoothing back the hair from his forehead, Hollis looking glumly on, clenching his teeth in impotent sympathy.

"These attacks do not come often," she volunteered as she again approached Hollis. "But they do come," she added, her voice catching. Hollis did not reply, feeling that he had no right to be inquisitive. But she continued, slightly more at ease and plainly pleased to have some one in whom she might confide.

"Ed was injured a year ago through a fall," she informed Hollis. "He was breaking a wild horse and a saddle girth broke and he fell, striking on his head. The wound healed, but he has

never been the same. At intervals these attacks come on and then he is irresponsible—and dangerous.” She shuddered. “You were watching him,” she added, looking suddenly at him; “did you find him as he is or did he attack you? Frequently when he has these attacks he comes here to Devil’s Hollow, explaining that he expects to find some of Dunlavey’s men. He doesn’t like Dunlavey,” she added with a flush, “since Dunlavey——” She hesitated and then went on determinedly—“well, since Dunlavey told him that he wanted to marry me. But Ed says that Dunlavey has a wife in Tucson and—well, I wouldn’t have married him anyway—the brute!”

“Exactly,” agreed Hollis gravely, trying to repress a thrill of satisfaction; “of course you couldn’t marry him.” He understood now the meaning of Dunlavey’s words to her in Dry Bottom. “If you wasn’t such a damn prude,” he had said. He looked at the girl with a sudden, grim smile. “He said something about running you and your brother out of the country,” he said; “of course you won’t allow him to do that?”

The girl’s slight figure stiffened. “I would like to see him try it!” she declared defiantly.

Hollis grinned. “That’s the stuff!” he

sympathized. "I rather think that Dunlavey is something of a bluffer—that folks in this country have allowed him to have his own way too much."

She shook her head doubtfully. "I don't know about that," she returned. Then she smiled. "You are the new owner of the Circle Bar, aren't you?"

Hollis started, looking at her with a surprised smile. "Yes," he returned, "I am the new owner. But how did you know it? I haven't told anyone here except Neil Norton and Judge Graney. Have Norton and the Judge been talking?"

"They haven't talked to me," she assured him with a demure smile. "You see," she added, "you were a stranger in Dry Bottom, and after you left the Fashion you went right down to the court house. I knew Judge Graney had been your father's friend. And then I saw Neil Norton coming into town with the buckboard." She laughed. "You see, it wasn't very hard to add two and two."

"Why, no," Hollis agreed, "it wasn't. But how did you happen to see me go down to the court house?"

"Why, I watched you!" she returned. And then suddenly aware of her mistake in admitting

that she had felt an interest in him at their first meeting, she lowered her gaze in confusion and stood, kicking with her booted toe into a hummock, her face suddenly very red.

The situation might have been embarrassing for her had not her brother created a diversion by suddenly sighing and struggling to sit up. The girl was at his side in an instant, assisting him. The young man's bewilderment was pitiful. He sat silent for a full minute, gazing first at his sister and then at Hollis, and finally at his surroundings. Then, when a rational gleam had come into his eyes he bowed his head, a blush of shame sweeping over his face and neck.

"I expect I've been at it again," he muttered, without looking up.

The girl leaned over him, reassuring him, patting his face lovingly, letting him know by all a woman's arts of the sympathy and love she bore for him. Hollis watched her with a grim, satisfied smile. If he had had a sister he would have hoped that she would be like her. He stepped forward and seized the young man by the arm, helping him to his feet.

"You are right now," he assured him; "there has been no harm done."

Standing, the young man favored Hollis with a careful inspection. He flushed again. "You're

the man that rode through the draw," he said. "I saw you and thought you were one of Dunlavey's men. I shot at you once, and was going to shoot again, but something cracked in my head. I hope I didn't hit you." Embarrassment again seized him; his eyes drooped. "Of course you are not one of Dunlavey's men," he added, "or you wouldn't be here, talking to sis. No friend of Dunlavey's could do that." He looked at the girl with a tender smile. "I don't know what I'd do if it wasn't for her," he added, speaking to Hollis. "But I expect it's a good thing that I'm not crazy all the time." He looked searchingly at Hollis. "I've never seen you before," he said. "Who are you?"

"I am Kent Hollis."

The young man's eyes lighted. "Not Jim Hollis's son?" he asked.

Hollis nodded. The young man's face revealed genuine pleasure. "You going to stay in this here country?" he asked.

"I am going to run the Circle Bar," returned Hollis slowly.

"Bully!" declared the young man. "There's some folks around here said you wouldn't have nerve enough to stay." He made a wry face. "But I reckon you've got nerve or you'd have hit the breeze when I started to stampede." He

suddenly held out a hand. "I like you," he said impulsively. "You and me are going to be friends. Shake!"

Hollis saw a smile of pleasure light up the girl's face, which she tried to conceal by brushing the young man's clothing with a gloved hand, meanwhile keeping him between her and Hollis.

Hollis stood near the boulder, watching them as they prepared to depart, the girl telling her brother that he would find his pony on the plains beyond the canyon.

"I am glad I didn't hit you," the young man told Hollis as he started away with the girl. "If you are not scared off you might take a run down to the shack some time—it's just down the creek a ways."

Hollis hesitated and then, catching the girl's glance, he smiled.

"I can't promise when," he said, looking at the girl, "but you may be sure that I will look you up the first chance I get."

He stood beside the boulder until he saw them disappear around the wall of the canyon. Then with a satisfied grin he walked to his pony, mounted, and was off through the draw toward the Circle Bar ranchhouse.

CHAPTER VI

HOLLIS RENEWS AN ACQUAINTANCE

RUMOR, that mysterious disseminator of news whose tongues are legion, whispered that the Dry Bottom *Kicker* was to come to life. Wherefore curiosity led many of Dry Bottom's citizens past the door of the *Kicker* office to steal covert glances at the young man whose figure was bent over the desk inside. Many passed in silence after looking at the young man—he did not see them. Others commented gravely or humorously according to their whim—the young man did not hear them. Seated at the desk he gave his attention to the tasks before him—he was not concerned with rumor; the curiosity of Dry Bottom's citizens did not affect him. Seriously, methodically, steadily, he worked at his desk, while rumor wagged her tongues and curiosity lounged past the window.

It was Hollis's first visit to the *Kicker* office; he had come to work and there was much that he could do. He had found the *Kicker* installed in a one story frame building, verging upon dilapi-

dation, unpainted, dingy. The appearance of its exterior had given Hollis a queer sensation in the pit of the stomach. He was cheered a little by the businesslike appearance of the interior. It was not what he had been used to, but he felt that it would answer very well in this locality, and—well, he planned to make improvements.

About twenty by forty, he estimated the size of the interior. Originally there had been only one room. This had been divided into three sections by partitions. An old, flat-topped desk sat near the front window, a swivel chair before it. Along the wall above the desk were several rows of shelving with paste-board boxes and paper piled neatly up. Calendars, posters, and other specimens of the printer's art covered the walls. In the next room was another desk. Piles of advertising electrotypes, empty forms, and papers filled the corners. The composing room was in the rear. Everything was in order here; type cases, stands, forms. There were a proof press, some galley racks, a printing press, with a forlorn-looking gasolene engine near it. A small cast-iron stove stood in a corner with its door yawning open, its front bespattered with tobacco juice. A dilapidated imposing stone ranged along the rear wall near a door that

opened into the sunlight. A man stood before one of the type cases distributing type. He did not look up at Hollis's entrance.

"Hello!" greeted Hollis.

The man hesitated in his work and looked up. "Hello," he returned, perfunctorily.

"I suppose your name is Potter?" Hollis inquired cordially. Judge Graney had told him that if he succeeded in finding the compositor he would have him at the *Kicker* office this morning. Potter had gone to work without further orders.

"Yes," said the man. He came forward.

"I am the new owner of the *Kicker*," Hollis informed him with a smile.

"Jim Hollis's boy?" inquired Potter, straightening. At Hollis's nod he stepped quickly forward and grasped the hand the latter offered him, squeezing it tightly. "Of course you are Jim Hollis's boy!" he said, finishing his inspection. "You are the living image of him!" He swept his hand around toward the type case. "I am working, you see. Judge Graney wrote me last week that you wanted me and I came as soon as I could. Is it true that the *Kicker* is going to be a permanent institution?"

"The *Kicker* is here to stay!" Hollis informed him.

Potter's face lighted with pleasure. "That's bully!" he said. "That's bully!"

He was of medium height, slender, lean faced, with a magnificent head, and a wealth of brown hair thickly streaked with silver. His thin lips were strong; his chin, though a trifle weak, was well formed; his eyes slightly bleared, but revealing, in spite of this defect, unmistakable intelligence. In the first flashing glance which Hollis had taken at him he had been aware that here was a person of more than ordinary mental ability and refinement. It was with a pang of pity that he remembered Judge Graney's words to the effect that he was a good workman—"when sober." Hollis felt genuinely sorry for him.

"I have had a talk with Judge Graney," volunteered Potter. "He tells me that you are a newspaper man. Between us we ought to be able to get out a very respectable paper."

"We will," calmly announced Hollis; "and we'll get the first issue out Saturday. Come in here and we'll talk about it."

He led the way to the front room and seated himself at the desk, motioning Potter to another chair. Within the next hour he knew all about the *Kicker*. It was a six-column sheet of four pages. The first page was devoted to local news.

The second carried some local advertisements, exchange clippings, and two or three columns of syndicate plate matter. On the third page two columns were devoted to editorials, one to advertisements, and three to local news in large type. The fourth, and last page was filled with more plate matter and a litter of "foreign" advertising—patent-medicines, soaps, hair-dye.

At the first glance it appeared that the paper must be a paying proposition, for there were a goodly proportion of advertisements. Yet Hollis had his suspicions about the advertisements. When he had spoken to Potter about them he discovered that quite a number of them were what is known to the craft as "dead ads"—which meant advertisements upon which payment had ceased and which were carried either for the purpose of filling up the paper or because it was found cheaper to run them than to set type for the space which would be left by their absence.

"We won't carry any dead ads!" announced Hollis.

"Several of these are big merchants," said Potter, pointing them out with inky forefinger; "though the contracts have run out the appearance of their ads lends the *Kicker* a certain moral support—the little fellows don't know that they are not paid for and it draws their business."

"We don't care for that kind of business," smiled Hollis; "we're going to run a real newspaper. We're going to get paid ads!"

"I hope so," hesitatingly replied Potter.

"Of course you do," laughed Hollis; "but whether we get paid ads or not this newspaper is coming out regularly and on time. Furthermore, we're going to cut down on this plate stuff; we don't want a paper filled with stale articles on snakes, antedated ocean disasters, Egyptian monoliths, and the latest style in opera hats. We'll fill the paper with local news—we'll ginger things up a little. You are pretty well acquainted here—I'll leave the local items to you. What town near here compares with Dry Bottom in size?"

"There's Lazette," returned Potter; "over in Colfax County."

"How far from here?"

"Eighty miles."

"Got a newspaper?"

"Yes; the *Eagle*."

"Bully! Step on the *Eagle's* toes. Make the *Eagle* scream. Get into an argument with it about something—anything. Tell Lazette that as a town it's forty miles behind Dry Bottom. That will stir up public spirit and boom our subscription list. You see, Potter, civic pride is a

big asset to a newspaper. We'll start a row right off the reel. Furthermore, we're going to have some telegraph news. I'll make arrangements for that to-day."

Hollis's enthusiasm was infectious; a flash of spirit lighted up Potter's eyes as he rose from his chair. "I'm going to set up the head for the first page," he said. "Probably you'll want a slogan; that sort of thing is the style out here."

"We'll have one," returned Hollis briskly. "Set this in triple leads: '*We Herald the Coming of the Law! The Kicker is Here to Stay!*'"

"Good!" declared Potter. He went into the composing room and Hollis saw his fine old head bent over a type case. Hollis turned to his desk.

He sat there long, his tall, lithe body slack, grim, serious lines in his lean face. He had thought of his conversation with Judge Graney concerning ambition—his ambition, the picture upon which his mind had dwelt many times. A little frame printing office in the West was not one of its features. He sighed with resignation and began methodically to look over the papers in the desk, finding many things to interest him. He discovered that in spite of his father's one great fault he had been a methodical man. He smiled regretfully, wishing that he might have been able to have seen more of him. Among the

papers he hoped to find a personal note—a word—from his father. He found nothing of that character.

After a time he took up a pen and began to write. Long ago he had decided that in the first issue of the paper he would attack the Cattle-men's Association. Judge Graney had ridden out to the Circle Bar on the previous Saturday afternoon, remaining over Sunday, and accompanying Hollis on the return trip Monday morning.

While at the ranch the Judge had spent much of his time in communicating to Hollis his views of the situation in Union County and in acquainting him with the elder Hollis's intentions regarding the newspaper. Hollis had made some inquiries on his own account, with the result that when he reached the *Kicker* office this morning he felt that he had acquired a good and sufficient knowledge of the situation.

Looking over the old copy of the *Kicker* he studied some of the advertisements. Evidently some Dry Bottom merchants had been brave enough to antagonize Dunlavey by advertising in the *Kicker*. With this copy of the *Kicker* in hand Hollis rose from his desk, told Potter he was going out, and proceeded to visit some of the merchants whose advertisements appeared in

the paper, hoping that their bravery still abided with them. He made a good solicitor. Some of the merchants flatly refused, saying they did not care to risk Dunlavey's anger. Others demurred, confidentially announcing that they had never considered the paper seriously and that there was really no good in advertising in Dry Bottom anyway—the town wasn't big enough. Half a dozen listened quietly while he told them that the *Kicker* was in Dry Bottom to stay and then smiled and told him to run their advertisements. They rather admired his "nerve" and were not afraid of Dunlavey.

At noon Hollis stepped into a restaurant called the Alhambra. While he ate he was critically inspected; the Alhambra swarmed with customers, and the proprietor quietly informed him that he was a "drawin' card" and hoped he'd "grub" there regularly. In return for his promise to do so Hollis secured his advertisement.

Leaving the Alhambra he returned to the *Kicker* office, seating himself again at his desk. The sun came slantwise through the window full upon him; the heat was oppressive; the flint like alkali dust sifted through the crevices in the building and settled over everything in the room; myriad flies droned in the white sunlight before the open door. He heard nothing, felt nothing,

saw nothing—for his thoughts were miles away, in an upper story of a big office building in the East from whose windows he even now looked down upon a bustling city.

Life would be so different here. He heard a sound behind him and turned. Dunlavey was standing just inside the door, his great arms folded over his chest. He had been watching Hollis, his eyes narrowed with a cynically humorous expression.

Hollis knew that by this time Dunlavey must have discovered his identity. He swung slowly around in his chair, his face wearing an expression of whimsical amusement as he greeted his victim of a few days previous.

“Welcome to the *Kicker* office,” he said quietly.

Dunlavey did not move. Evidently he had expected another sort of greeting and was slightly puzzled over Hollis’s manner. He remained motionless and Hollis had an opportunity to study him carefully and thoroughly. His conclusions were brief and comprehensive. They were expressed tersely to himself as he waited for Dunlavey to speak: “A trickster and a cheat—dangerous.”

Dunlavey’s eyes flashed metallically for an instant, but immediately the humorous cynicism came into them again.

"I don't think you mean all of that," he said evenly.

Hollis laughed. "I am not in the habit of saying things that I do not mean," he said quietly. "I am here to do business and I am ready to talk to anybody who wants to do business with me."

Dunlavey's hands fell to his sides and were shoved into his capacious trousers' pockets. "Right," he said tersely: "that's what I'm here for—to talk business."

He pulled a chair over close to Hollis and seated himself in it, moving deliberately, a certain grim reserve in his manner. Hollis watched him, marveling at his self-control. He reflected that it required will power of a rare sort to repress or conceal the rage which he surely must feel over his humiliation of two weeks before. That Dunlavey was able to so mask his feelings convinced Hollis that he had to deal with a man of extraordinary character.

"I recollect meeting you the other day," said Dunlavey after he had become seated. He smiled with his lips, his eyes glittering again. "I'll say that we got acquainted then. There ain't no need for us to shake hands now." He showed his teeth in a mirthless grin. "I didn't know you then, but I know you now. You're Jim Hollis's boy."

Hollis nodded. Dunlavey continued evenly: "Your father and me wasn't what you might call bosom friends. I reckon Judge Graney has told you that—if he ain't you've heard it from some one else. It don't make any difference. So there won't be any misunderstanding I'll tell you that I ain't figgering on you and me hitching up to the mutual friendship wagon either. I might say that we wasn't introduced right." He grinned evilly. "But I ain't letting what happened interfere with the business that's brought me here to-day. I've heard that you're intending to start the *Kicker* again; that you're figgering on staying here and running the Circle Bar. What I'm here for is to buy you out. I'm offering you fifteen thousand dollars for the Circle Bar and this damn newspaper."

Dunlavey had lost a little of the composure which had characterized his actions since entering the office and the last words of his speech had writhed venomously through his lips.

Hollis's face betrayed absolutely no emotion. Though Dunlavey's visit to the *Kicker* office had surprised him he was not surprised at his offer for the ranch and the newspaper, for according to Judge Graney he had made some such offer to the elder Hollis. Coming now, with an addition of five thousand dollars, Dunlavey's offer

seemed to advertise his reluctance to continue the war that he had waged. Hollis appreciated the situation. If Dunlavey were to buy him off now there would come an end to the warfare that had already been an expensive one for the interests represented by Dunlavey. Likewise, the acceptance of the offer would give Hollis an opportunity to withdraw gracefully. Dunlavey had placed the issue squarely before him. The young man held his future in his hands and he did not reply at once.

He sat silent for a few moments, studying the coarse, brutal face of the man seated before him, noting that his under jaw had come forward slightly, and that the cold, hard glitter had come again in his eyes. However, Hollis's silence meant nothing beyond the fact that he was going slowly over the history of the fight between his father and the man who sat there representing the interests which had begun the war. He had no thought of surrendering—that would be dishonorable. He was merely revolving the situation in his mind, considering how best to word his refusal. He did not want to appear belligerent; he did not want to precipitate war. But he did want Dunlavey to know that he purposed to have his rights; he wanted Dunlavey to know that he could not be frightened into surrendering them.

He clasped one hand over his knee and leaned back in his chair, his gaze meeting Dunlavey's steadily.

"Dunlavey," he said quietly, "what is the actual value of the Circle Bar ranch?"

Dunlavey smiled blandly. "You couldn't find any man around these parts to take it at any price," he returned.

"Why?" questioned Hollis.

Dunlavey grinned mysteriously. "I reckon you know why," he returned; "you're pretty much of a tenderfoot, but I reckon Judge Graney has put you wise to the situation. There ain't nobody wants to buy the Circle Bar except me."

"Why?" persisted Hollis.

"I reckon you know that too," laughed Dunlavey. "It ain't no secret. The Cattlemen's Association is running things in this here county and it ain't wanting anyone to buy the Circle Bar except me. And nobody is fool enough to antagonize the Association. That's the why, if you want to know real bad."

"You are frank about it at any rate," conceded Hollis smiling slightly. "But that doesn't get us anywhere. What I am trying to get at is this: what would the Circle Bar bring in cash if the Cattlemen's Association ceased to be a factor in the county?"

Dunlavey grinned broadly. "For a tender-foot you're real amusing," he derided. "There ain't nobody out here crazy enough to think that the Cattlemen's Association will ever be put out of business!"

Hollis's lips curled a little, but his gaze was still steady.

"That's evasion, Dunlavey," he said quietly. "You will remember that I asked you what the Circle Bar would bring 'if' the Association ceased to be a factor."

Dunlavey favored Hollis with a perplexed grin. "I don't know what difference that makes," he returned. "We're dealing with what's before us now—we ain't considering what might be. But if you want to know my personal opinion it's that the Circle Bar might bring thirty thousand."

"Thanks," said Hollis dryly; "that's getting somewhere. And now we'll be able to talk business. We've got thirty thousand to start with. I am told that when the Association began its war against my father he was rather prosperous. Usually he rounded up about two thousand head of cattle. But we'll call it a thousand. We'll say that they brought about thirty dollars a head, which would make an income of thirty thousand dollars a year, gross. We'll deduct fifty per cent

for operating expenses, losses, and so on. That would leave about fifteen thousand. You've been fighting the Circle Bar for several years. We'll call it five. Five times fifteen thousand is seventy-five thousand. That represents the sum which my father would have made from the Circle Bar if you had not fought him. Add to that the thirty thousand which you admit would be a fair figure for the ranch if the Association were eliminated as a factor, and we have a total of one hundred and five thousand dollars." He smiled and leaned a little farther back in his chair, narrowing his eyes at Dunlavey. "Now we have reached a point where we can get somewhere. I'll take one hundred thousand dollars for the Circle Bar."

The calm announcement had no effect upon Dunlavey except to cause him to grin derisively.

"For a tenderfoot you're pretty slick," he allowed, his teeth showing. "You've figured it out so that it sounds right reasonable. But you've forgot one thing. The Cattlemen's Association ain't eliminated. It says that the Circle Bar is worth fifteen thousand. You'll take that or——" He smiled grimly, holding back the threat.

"I think I know what you mean," said Hollis quietly, without changing color. "You mean

that the Cattlemen's Association will continue its fight and eventually ruin the Circle Bar. Perhaps it will—no man can tell what lies in the future. But I can tell you this: you can't retard progress."

"No?" said Dunlavey with an irritating drawl.

Hollis smiled composedly. He spoke without bitterness. "Dunlavey," he said, "I'm going to tell you something which you perhaps know but will not admit. Your Association has been successful in pulling the strings which make the politicians at Washington jump to do your bidding. I don't accuse you of buying them, but in any event they have greased the ways over which your Association has slipped to power. And now you think that the impetus you have gained will carry you along indefinitely. It won't. Everything in this world runs its natural course and when it does there comes an end.

"If you were endowed with the average foresight you would be able to see that things cannot always go on the way they have. The law must come. It is inevitable. Its coming will be facilitated by such organizations as the Cattlemen's Association and by such men as you. Back in the East the forces of Good and Bad are bat-

ting. The forces of Good will be victorious. The government at Washington is familiar with the conditions that exist here and sooner or later will be compelled to act. When it does the small cattle owner will receive protection."

"We're holding tight till the law comes," sneered Dunlavey; "which won't be soon."

"Perhaps not," admitted Hollis dryly; "good things come slowly. Meanwhile, if you don't care to accept my figure for the Circle Bar I shall follow your example and hold tight until the law comes."

"Meaning that you won't sell, I suppose?" sneered Dunlavey.

"Meaning just that," returned Hollis quietly. "I am going to fight you. I have offered the Circle Bar at a fair figure and you have responded with threats. I wouldn't sell to you now if you offered one hundred and fifty thousand. The Circle Bar is not for sale!"

Dunlavey had not moved. He sat quiet, leaning a little forward, his hands resting on his knees, his eyes narrowed to glittering pin-points as he watched Hollis. When the latter had concluded he leaned back, laughing hoarsely.

"What are you going to do with this damn newspaper?" he demanded.

"The newspaper will be used as a weapon

against you," returned Hollis. "It will kick loud and long against such organizations as the Cattlemen's Association—against such men as you. Ostensibly the *Kicker* will be a Dry Bottom newspaper, but it will appear in every city in the East; the matter that appears in it will be reprinted in Chicago, in Washington, in New York—in fact in every city in which I have a friend engaged in the newspaper business—and I have a number. I am going to stir up sentiment against you. I am going to be the Law's advance agent!"

Dunlavey rose, his lips curling with contempt. "You make me sick!" he sneered. He turned his back and walked to the door, returning and standing in front of Hollis, ominously cool and deliberate. "So that's the how of it?" he said evenly. "You've come out here looking for fight. Well, you'll get it—plenty of it. I owe you something——"

"Wait, Dunlavey," Hollis interrupted, without excitement; "I want you to understand that there isn't anything personal in this. I am going to fight you because you are a member of the Cattlemen's Association and not because you were my father's enemy. I am not afraid of you. I suspect that you will try to make things decidedly interesting for me from now on and I

suppose I ought to be properly troubled. But I am not. I shall not be surprised at anything you do. I think that is all. Please close the door when you go out."

He turned to the desk, ignoring Dunlavey. Sitting there, his senses alert, he heard the door slam. From beyond it came a curse. Silence again reigned in the office; Hollis was alone with the dust and the heat—and some very original thoughts.

CHAPTER VII

THE "KICKER" BECOMES AN INSTITUTION

IT was mid-July—and hot. The sun shone continually; the nights were uncomfortable, stifling. The dust was everywhere and grew deeper and lighter as the days passed. Water grew scarce; cattle suffered, lowing throughout the night, during the day searching the bogs and water holes for drops of moisture. Men looked up at the clear, cloudless sky and prayed—and cursed—for rain. The rain did not come. It was one long, continuous nightmare of heat.

The *Kicker* had appeared four times—on Saturdays—on time. Telegraphic communication with the outside world had been established. Potter had taken up his residence at the Circle Bar. War had been declared between the *Kicker* and the *Lazette Eagle*. Hollis had written an argumentative essay on the virtues of Dry Bottom as a town, dwelling upon its superiority over Lazette. The editor of the *Eagle* had replied with some bitterness, setting forth in detail why Dry Bottom did *not* compare with Lazette. As the

editor of the *Eagle* mentioned population and civic spirit in his bill of particulars the war promised to be of long duration—questions of superiority between spirited persons are never settled. And Hollis had succeeded in arousing the spirit of Dry Bottom's citizens. They began to take some interest in the *Kicker*. Many subscribed; all read it.

From the "local" columns of the paper one might have discovered that many public and private improvements were contemplated. Among these the following items were of the greatest interest:

Steps are being taken by the government toward the erection of a fence around the court house grounds. Judge Graney is contemplating a lawn and flowers. When these improvements are completed there will be no comparison between our court house and the dilapidated hovel which disgraces the county seat of Colfax. The *Lazette Eagle* please notice.

* * * *

William Dunn, the proprietor of the Alhambra eating house, announces that in the near future he will erect a new sign. Thereafter the Alhambra will be known as the Alhambra Restaurant. This is a step forward. We have been informed that there is no restaurant in Lazette. Good boy, Dunn.

* * * *

Chet Miller's general merchandise store is to be repainted throughout. Chet is public spirited.

Everybody of any importance in Dry Bottom received weekly mention of some sort in the *Kicker*. Chet Miller was heard to say that the *Kicker* was a “hummer,” and no one ascribed his praise of the paper to thanks for the appearance of his name therein, for all who would have criticized were silenced by the appearance of their own names.

In the fourth issue of the paper appeared several new advertisements. Judicious personal mention and lively news locals had aroused public spirit to a point where it ignored thoughts of Dunlavey's displeasure.

Upon the Saturday which had marked the first issue of the *Kicker* under Hollis's ownership he had employed a circulation manager. That afternoon on the street near the *Kicker* office he had almost collided with a red haired youth of uncertain age who had bounded out through the door of a private dwelling. In order to keep from knocking the youth over Hollis was forced to seize him by the arms and literally lift him off his feet. While in the air the youth's face was close to Hollis's and both grinned over the occurrence. When Hollis set the youth down he stood for an instant, looking up into Hollis's face and a grin of amusement overspread his own.

"Shucks!" he said slowly. "If it ain't the tenderfoot editor!"

"That's just who it is," returned Hollis with a smile.

The youth grinned as he looked critically at Hollis. "You gittin' out that there paper to-day, mister?" he questioned.

"Right now," returned Hollis.

"Bully!" exclaimed the youth. He surveyed Hollis with a frank admiration. "They said you wouldn't have the nerve to do it," he said; but, say! I reckon they ain't got you sized up right!"

Hollis smiled, remembering that though the paper had been printed it was not yet distributed. He placed a hand on the youth's shoulder.

"Have you got nerve enough to pass the *Kicker* around to the people of this town?" he questioned.

"I reckon," grinned the youth. "I was comin' down to ast you for the job when you bumped into me. I used to peddle them for your dad. My name's Jiggs Lenahan—mebbe you've heard of me?"

Hollis smiled. "The question of delivering the *Kicker* was one of the details that I overlooked," he said. "But fortunately it is arranged now. Henceforth, Jiggs, you are the *Kicker's* official circulation manager. Likewise,

if you care to add to your income, you can help Potter around the office.”

So it had been arranged, and Jiggs entered upon his duties with an energy that left little doubt in his employer's mind that he would prove a valuable addition to the force.

In Hollis's “Salutatory” to the people of Dry Bottom he had announced in a quiet, unostentatious paragraph that while he had not come to Dry Bottom for a free fight, he would permit no one to tread on his toes. His readers' comprehension of the metaphor was complete—as was evidenced by the warm hand-clasps which he received from citizens who were not in sympathy with the Dunlavey régime. It surprised him to find how many such there were in town. He was convinced that all this element needed was a leader and he grimly determined to step quietly into that position himself.

The second issue of the *Kicker* was marked by a more aggressive spirit—a spirit engendered by the sympathetic reception of the first issue. In it he stated concisely his views of the situation in Union County, telling his readers that the best interests of the community demanded that Dunlavey's evil influence be wiped out. This article was headed: “Dry Bottom's Future,” and won him many friends.

The third issue contained stronger language,

and the fourth was energetically aggressive. As he had decided before the first appearance of the paper, he took a certain number of copies of each issue, folded them neatly, stamped and addressed them, and mailed them to a number of newspapers throughout the country whose editors he knew. He also directed copies to a number of his friends in the East—to the president of his college, and last, to the Secretary of the Interior at Washington, who had formerly resided near him in Boston, and with whom he had a long acquaintance. There had been a change of administration the fall previous and he was certain that the new administration would not ignore the situation. To the Secretary, and also to a number of his friends, he wrote personal letters, explaining in detail the exact condition of affairs in Union County.

He had not seen Dunlavey since the day the latter had come to the *Kicker* office to negotiate for the purchase of the paper. On several of his rides to and from the Circle Bar ranch he had seen signs of life at the Circle Cross; once or twice he thought he saw someone watching him from a hill on the Circle Cross side of the Rabbit-Ear, but of this he was not quite certain, for the hill-top was thickly wooded and the distance great.

He had been warned by Norton not to ride too often over the same trail lest Dunlavey send someone to ambush him.

Hollis had laughed at the warning, though thanking Norton for it. He told his range boss that he did not anticipate any immediate trouble with Dunlavey.

"It all depends on how Big Bill feels," returned Norton with a grim smile. "If you've got him mad there's no telling. And there are plenty of places between here and Dry Bottom where a man might be shot from ambush. And nobody'd ever know who done it. I wouldn't ride the Dry Bottom trail every day. There's the old Coyote trail, that takes you past the Razor-Back and through Devil's Hollow to Little Canyon an' along the hills to the other side."

He laughed. "There's only one thing you need to be afraid of if you take the Coyote trail, an' that's Ed Hazelton. Ed gets spells when he's plum crazy. He's Nellie Hazelton's brother—her that Dunlavey was pesterin' when you slammed him." He laughed again, significantly. "Though if Ed knowed you was the man who took his sister's part you wouldn't need to be much scared of him—I've heard that he's got a pretty good memory for his friends—even when he's off."

Hollis had not told Norton of his experience in Devil's Hollow, nor did he tell him now. But he followed his advice about taking the Coyote trail, and the following day when he made the trip to Dry Bottom he returned that way. About half way between Dry Bottom and the Circle Bar he came upon a little adobe cabin snuggling an arroyo through which trickled a small stream of water.

It was an ideal location for a small rancher, and Hollis observed that the buildings were in order—evidently Nellie Hazelton and her brother were provident. He saw some cattle grazing on the edge of a small grass plateau which began at the slope of the arroyo through which the stream of water ran. A shout reached his ears as he sat motionless in the saddle looking about him, and he saw Ed Hazelton on the plateau among the cattle, waving a hand to him. The young man began to descend the side of the plateau, but before he had fairly started Nellie Hazelton had come out of the front door of the cabin and stood on the edge of the small porch, smiling at him.

“So you did come, after all?” was her greeting.

Hollis spurred his pony closer and sat smiling down at her. “I don't think anything could

have stopped me after your invitation," he returned quickly.

"Oh!" she said. The sudden color that came into her face told of her confusion. It betrayed the fact that she knew he had come because of her. Her brother's invitation in Devil's Hollow had been merely formal; there had been another sort of invitation in her eyes as she and her brother had left him that day.

"Won't you get off your horse?" she said while he still sat motionless. "It's quite a while before sundown and you have plenty of time to reach the Circle Bar before dark."

He had determined to discover something of the mystery that surrounded her and her brother, and so he was off his pony quickly and seating himself in a chair that she drew out of the cabin for him. By the time her brother had reached the porch Hollis was stretched comfortably out in the chair and was answering several timid questions concerning his opinion of the country and his new responsibilities.

She was glad he liked the country, she said. It was wonderful. In the five years they had been here they had enjoyed it thoroughly—that was, of course, barring the trouble they had had with Dunlavey.

Of their trouble with Dunlavey Hollis would

hear much later, he told himself. At present he was more interested in discovering something about her and her brother, though he did not wish to appear inquisitive. Therefore his voice was politely casual.

“Then you are not a Westerner?” he said.

She smiled mournfully. “No,” she returned; “we—Ed and I—were raised in Illinois, near Springfield. We came out here five years ago after—after mother died.” Her voice caught. “Sometimes it seems terribly lonesome out here,” she added; “when I get to thinking of—of our other home. But”—she smiled bravely through the sudden moisture that had come into her eyes—“since Ed got hurt I don’t have much time to think of myself. Poor fellow.”

Hollis was silent. He had never had a sister but he could imagine how she must feel over the misfortune that had come to her brother. It must be a sacrifice for her to remain in this country, to care for a brother who must be a great burden to her at times, to fight the solitude, the hardships, to bear with patience the many inconveniences which are inevitable in a new, unsettled country. He felt a new admiration for her and a profound sympathy.

“I think that you must be a very brave young woman,” he said earnestly.

"Oh!" she returned with a sudden, illuminating smile. "It isn't hard to be brave. But at times I find it hard to be patient."

"Patience is one of the cardinal virtues," declared Hollis, "but it takes bravery of a rare sort to remain in this country, surrounded with the care——"

Her fingers were suddenly over her lips warningly, and he saw Ed Hazelton nearing the porch.

"I wouldn't have him know for the world," she said rapidly. "It isn't a care to look after someone you love."

Hollis smiled grimly at the reproach in her voice and rose to greet her brother.

The latter seemed to be quite recovered from the attack he had suffered in Devil's Hollow and talked freely and intelligently of affairs in the country. Hollis found that on the whole he was a well informed young man—quiet, modest, and apparently well able to give a good account of himself in spite of his affliction. He was bitter against Dunlavey and thanked Hollis warmly for his defense of his sister.

At sundown Hollis departed, telling the Hazeltons that since he was their neighbor he would not neglect to see them occasionally. As he rode away into the dusk Nellie Hazelton stood on the porch smilingly waving her hand at him.

As he threaded his way through the rapidly growing darkness he felt an unaccountable satisfaction over the fact that he had elected to remain in Union County; that henceforth his fortunes were to be linked with those of a brave young woman who had also accepted the robes of sacrifice and who was committed to war against their common enemy—Dunlavey. Curiously, during the past few days he had felt a decided change in his attitude toward life. His old ambition was no longer uppermost in his mind—it had been crowded out of his existence. In its place had been erected a new pinnacle of promise. A seat among the mighty was a worthy goal. Yet the lowly bench of sacrifice was not without its compensations.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCERNING THE "SIX-O'CLOCK"

ON Friday evening previous to the Saturday on which the *Kicker* was to be issued for the fifth consecutive time by Hollis, Potter did not ride out to the Circle Bar. There still remained some type to be set and Potter had declared his intention of completing the work and staying overnight in town. Hollis had acquiesced and had departed for the Circle Bar alone.

When he reached Dry Bottom the following morning he found a small crowd of people in front of the *Kicker* office. During the night some one had posted a written notice on the front door, and when Hollis dismounted from his pony there were perhaps a dozen interested citizens grouped about the door, reading the notice. There were several of the town's merchants and a number of cowboys—new arrivals and those who had remained overnight to gamble and participate in the festivities that were all-night features of the dives. There were also the usual loafers,

who constitute an element never absent in any group of idlers in any street. All, however, gave way before Hollis and allowed him to reach the door without molestation, though in passing he observed significant grins on several faces.

The notice was written in a bold, legible hand.

“Mr. Hollis:”—it read, the prefix underscored—“The express leaves town this afternoon at six o’clock—goin east. Better be on it.”

Signed—“Y. Z.”

Hollis read the notice and then turned and quietly surveyed his watchful, interested audience. He smiled grimly, seeing several faces which, though plainly expressing amusement, seemed quietly sympathetic. He felt that these were wishing him success, though doubting his ability to cope with his enemies. Other faces were plainly antagonistic in expression. He looked at both for an instant and then turned again to the notice and producing a pencil printed boldly on its face the slogan he had devised:

"We Herald the Coming of the Law! The Kicker is Here to Stay!"

And below he indulged in this sarcasm: *"Don't hold the express on my account!"*

Signed—"KENT HOLLIS."

Leaving his audience to stare after him Hollis pushed open the door of the office and entered.

He found Potter bending over the imposing table, hard at work on one of the forms. Three other forms, locked and ready for the press, stood in a corner. Potter looked up and smiled as his chief entered.

"See the notice on the door?" he inquired.

"Some of Dunlavey's work, I suppose," returned Hollis.

"Well, yes. I suppose Dunlavey is back of it. But Yuma tacked the sign up." He smiled soberly as Hollis flashed a grin at him. "They tried hard last night to get me to drink. Of course their purpose was to get me drunk so that I wouldn't be able to get the paper out to-day. I am not going to tell you how hard I had to fight myself to resist the temptation to drink. But you can see for yourself that I succeeded. The *Kicker* will be ready to go to press in an hour."

He felt Hollis's hand patting his shoulder

approvingly and he continued, a little hoarsely. "I took one drink at the Fashion last night after I got through here. Then I came back and went to sleep. I am a light sleeper and when some time after midnight I heard a sound at the door I got up and peered out of the window. I saw Yuma tacking up the notice. I suppose Dunlavey wrote it." He looked at Hollis with a whimsical expression. "I suppose you are going to take the express?" he inquired.

"Tried to get you drunk, did they?" shaking his head negatively to Potter's question, a smile on his face. "I can't understand that game," he continued, soberly. "Of course getting you drunk would have prevented the appearance of the paper on scheduled time. But if they wanted to do serious damage—of course I mean to the paper," he apologized with a grim smile, "why didn't they come down here—some of them—during your absence, and smash things up? That would have made the thing sure for them."

Potter laughed mirthlessly. "Of course they could have done that," he said; "it would have been easy—will be easy any time. But it wouldn't be artistic, would be coarse in fact. Dunlavey doesn't do things that way. If they smash your stuff, destroy your plant here, ruin

your type and press, and so forth, they invite sympathy in your behalf. But if they prevent the appearance of your paper without having done any damage to your plant they accomplish something—they expose you to ridicule. And in this country ridicule is a potent weapon—even if it involves nothing more serious than a drunken printer."

Hollis shook Potter's hand in silence. He had expected violence from Dunlavey; long before this he had expected him to show his hand, to attempt some covert and damaging action. And he had been prepared to fight to get the *Kicker* out. He had not expected subtlety from Dunlavey.

He went to his desk and sat in the chair, looking out through the window at the crowd that still lingered in front of the office. Most of the faces wore grins. Plainly they were amused, but Hollis saw that the amusement was of a grim sort. They appreciated the situation and enjoyed its humor but felt the tragedy behind it. Probably most of them were acquainted with Dunlavey's methods; some of them probably knew of the attempt that had been made to incapacitate Potter. Certainly those of them that did know had seen the failure of the attempt and were now speculating upon Dunlavey's next

move. Looking out of the window Hollis felt that some of his audience must be wondering whether the editor of the *Kicker* would pay any attention to the notice on the door. Would he scare?

Hollis had already decided that he would not "scare." He grinned at several of the men who watched him and then turned and instructed Potter to take down a column of type on the first page of the paper to make room for an article that he intended to write. Then he seized a pen and wrote a red hot defiance directed at the authors of the notice, which Potter set up under the heading:

"Why the Editor of the *Kicker* Won't Take the Express."

In clear, terse language he told his audience his reasons. This was America; he was an American, and he didn't purpose to allow the Cattlemen's Association—or any other association, gang, or individual—to dictate the policy of his paper or influence his private actions. Least of all did he purpose to allow anyone to "run him out of town." He printed the notice entire, adding his answer, assuring readers that he was sending copies of the *Kicker* to every newspaper in the East and that notices such as had been affixed to his door would react against the authors. He ended with the prophecy that

the law would come into Union County and that meanwhile the *Kicker* purposed to fight.

At noon Hollis took the usual number of copies to the station and mailed them. Walking down the street on his return from the station he attracted much attention. Men stood in the open doorways of saloons watching him, a number openly jeered; others sent subtle jibes after him. Still others were silent, their faces expressing amusement.

But he looked at none of them. He swung along the board walk, his face a little pale, his lips tightly closed, determined to pay no attention to the jeers that reached his ears.

When he passed the Fashion there were a number of men draped along its front; and he was conscious of many grins. Passing the men he heard low laughter and profane reference which caused his cheeks to redden. But he walked steadily on. Near the *Kicker* office he met Jiggs Lenehan. Followed by the youth he reached the office to find that Potter had completed the press work and that several hundred copies of the paper, the ink still moist on its pages, were stacked in orderly array on the imposing stone. In a very brief time Jiggs burst out of the office door, a bundle of papers under his arm, and began the work of distribution. Standing back from the window with Potter, Hollis watched

Jiggs until the latter reached the crowd in front of the Fashion saloon. Then all that Hollis could see of him was his red head. But that trade was brisk was proved by the press around Jiggs—the youth was passing out papers at a rapid rate and soon nearly every man in the crowd about the Fashion was engaged in reading, or,—if this important feature of his education had been neglected—in questioning his neighbor concerning the things that appeared in the paper.

Presently Jigg's customers in front of the Fashion were all supplied. Then other purchasers appeared. Soon the *Kicker* was being read by—it seemed—nearly every grown person in Dry Bottom. Business was suspended. Down the street men were congregated about the doors of many of the stores; others were sitting in doorways, still others leaned against buildings; some, not taking time to search for support, read while walking, or stood motionless on the board sidewalks, satisfying their curiosity.

Hollis watched through the window until he began to be certain that every person in town was supplied with a paper. Then with a grim smile he left the window and sought his chair beside the desk. He was satisfied. Dunlavey had made the first aggressive movement and the fight was on.

CHAPTER IX

HOW A BAD MAN LEFT THE " KICKER " OFFICE

IT was about one o'clock in the afternoon when the *Kicker* appeared on Dry Bottom's street. At about five minutes after one, Potter left the front of the office and walked to the rear room where he halted at the imposing stone. There he proceeded to "take down" the four forms. This done he calmly began distributing type.

While Potter worked Hollis sat very quietly at his desk in the front office, his arms folded, one hand supporting his chin, his lips forming straight lines, his eyes narrowed with a meditative expression. Occasionally Potter glanced furtively at him, his eyes filled with mingled expressions of sympathy, admiration, and concern.

Potter appreciated his chief's position. It meant something for a man of Hollis's years and training to bury himself in this desolate sink-hole of iniquity; to elect to carry on an unequal war with interests that controlled the law machinery of the county and Territory—whose power extended to Washington. No doubt the young

man was even now brooding over the future, planning his fight, pessimistically considering his chances of success. Potter's sympathy grew. He thought of approaching his chief with a word of encouragement. But while he hesitated, mentally debating the propriety of such an action, Hollis turned quickly and looked fairly at him, his forehead perplexed.

"Potter," he remarked, "I suppose there isn't a good brain specialist in this section of the country?"

"Why—why——" began Potter. Then he stopped and looked at his chief in wordless astonishment. His sympathy had been wasted.

"No," laughed Hollis, divining the cause of the compositor's astonishment, "personally I have no use for a brain specialist. I was thinking of some other person."

"Not me?" grinned Potter from behind his type case. He flushed a little at the thought of how near he had come to offering encouragement to a man who had not been in need of it, who, evidently, had not been thinking of the big fight at all. "Perhaps I need one," he added, eyeing Hollis whimsically; "a moment ago I thought you were in the dumps on account of the situation here—you seemed rather disturbed. It surprised me considerably to find that you had not been thinking of Dunlavey at all."

"No," admitted Hollis gravely, "I was not thinking of Dunlavey. I was wondering if something couldn't be done for Ed Hazelton."

"Something ought to be done for him," declared Potter earnestly. "I have watched that young man closely and I am convinced that with proper care and treatment he would recover fully. But I never heard of a specialist in this section—none, in fact, nearer than Chicago. And I've forgotten his name."

"It is Hammond," supplied Hollis. "I've been thinking of him. I knew his son in college. I am going to write to him."

He turned to his desk and took up a pen, while Potter resumed his work of distributing type.

About half an hour later Jiggs Lenehan strolled into the office wearing a huge grin on his face. "'Pears like everybody in town wants to read the *Kicker* to-day," he said with a joyous cackle. "Never had so much fun sellin' them. Gimme some more," he added breathlessly; "they's a gang down to the station howlin' for them. Say," he yelled at Hollis as he went out of the door with a big bundle of *Kickers* under his arm, "you're cert'nly some editor man!" He grinned admiringly and widely as he disappeared.

Hollis finished his letter to Hammond and then leaned back in his chair. For half an hour

he sat there, looking gravely out into the street and then, answering a sudden impulse, he rose and strode to the door.

"Going down to the court house," he informed Potter.

He found Judge Graney in his room, seated at the big table, a copy of the *Kicker* spread out in front of him. At his appearance the Judge pushed back his chair and regarded him with an approving smile.

"Well, Hollis," he said, "I see Dunlavey has played the first card."

"He hasn't taken the first trick," was the young man's quick reply.

"Fortunately not," laughed the judge. He placed a finger on a column in the *Kicker*. "This article about the Cattlemen's Association is a hummer—if I may be allowed the phrase. A straight, manly citation of the facts. It ought to win friends for you."

"I've merely stated the truth," returned Hollis, "and if the article seems good it is merely because it defends a principle whose virtue is perfectly obvious."

"But only a man who felt strongly could have written it," suggested the Judge.

"Perhaps. I admit feeling a deep interest in the question of cattle."

"Your ambition?" slyly insinuated the Judge.

"Is temporarily in abeyance—perhaps permanently."

"Then your original decision about remaining here has been—well, strengthened?"

Hollis nodded. The Judge grinned mysteriously. "There is an article on the first page of the *Kicker* which interested me greatly," he said. "It concerns the six o'clock train—going east. Do you happen to know whether the editor of the *Kicker* is going to use the express?"

Hollis smiled appreciatively. "The editor of the *Kicker* is going to use the express," he admitted, "though not in the manner some people are wishing. The usual number of copies of the *Kicker* are going to ride on the express, as are also some very forceful letters to the President of the United States and the Secretary of the Interior."

"Good!" said the Judge. He looked critically at Hollis. "I know that you are going to remain in Dry Bottom," he said slowly; "I have never doubted your courage. But I want to warn you to be careful. Don't make the mistake of thinking that the notice which you found on the door of the *Kicker* office this morning is a joke. They don't joke like that out here. Of course I know that you are not afraid and that

you won't run. But be careful—there are men out here who would snuff out a human life as quickly as they would the flame of a candle, and with as little fear of the consequences. I shouldn't like to hear of you using your revolver, but if you do have occasion to use it, use it fast and make a good job of it."

"I don't like to use a gun," returned Hollis gravely, "but all the same I shall bear your advice in mind." An expression of slight disgust swept over his face. "I don't see why men out here don't exhibit a little more courage," he said. "They all 'pack' a gun, as Norton says, and all are apparently yearning to use one. I don't see what satisfaction there could be in shooting a man with whom you have had trouble; it strikes me as being a trifle cowardly." He laughed grimly. "For my part," he added, "I can get more satisfaction out of slugging a man. Perhaps it isn't so artistic as shooting, but you have the satisfaction of knowing that your antagonist realizes and appreciates his punishment."

Judge Graney's gaze rested on the muscular frame of the young man. "I suppose if all men were built like you there would be less shooting done. But unfortunately nature has seen fit to use different molds in making her men. Not every man has the strength or science to use his fists, nor the courage. But there is one thing

that you will do well to remember. When you slug a man who carries a gun you only beat him temporarily; usually he will wait his chance and use his gun when you least expect him."

"I suppose you refer to Yuma Ed and Dunlavey?" suggested Hollis.

"Well, no, not Dunlavey. I have never heard of Dunlavey shooting anybody; he plays a finer game. But Yuma Ed, Greasy, Ten Spot, and some more who belong to the Dunlavey crowd are professional gun-men and do not hesitate to shoot. The chances are that Dunlavey will try to square accounts with you in some other manner, but I would be careful of Yuma—a blow in the face never sets well on a man of that character."

An hour later, when Hollis sat at his desk in the *Kicker* office, Judge Graney's words were recalled to him. He was thinking of his conversation with the Judge when Jiggs Lenehan burst into the office, breathless, his face pale and his eyes swimming with news. He was trembling with excitement.

"Ten Spot is comin' down here to put you out of business!" he blurted out when he could get his breath. "I was in the Fashion an' I heard him an' Yuma talkin' about you. Ten Spot is comin' here at six o'clock!"

Hollis turned slowly in his chair and faced the

boy. His cheeks whitened a little. Judge Graney had been right. Hollis had rather expected at some time or other he would have to have it out with Yuma, but he had expected he would have to deal with Yuma himself. He smiled a little grimly. It made very little difference whether he fought Yuma or some other man; when he had elected to remain in Dry Bottom he had realized that he must fight somebody—everybody in the Dunlavey crew. He looked at his watch and saw that the hands pointed to four. Therefore he had two hours to prepare for Ten Spot's coming. He smiled at the boy, looked back into the composing room and saw that Potter had ceased his labors and was leaning on a type case, watching him soberly. He grinned broadly at Potter and turned to Jiggs.

"How many *Kickers* did you sell?"

"Two hundred an' ten," returned the latter; "everybody bought them." He took a step forward; his hands clenching with the excitement that still possessed him. "I told you Ten Spot was comin' down here to kill you!" he said hoarsely and insistently. "Didn't you hear me?"

"I heard you," smiled Hollis, "and I understand perfectly. But I don't think we need to

get excited over it. Just how much money did you receive for the two hundred and ten papers?"

"Six dollars an' two bits," responded the boy, regarding Hollis wonderingly.

"It is yours," Hollis informed him; "there was to be no charge for the *Kicker* to-day."

The boy grinned with pleasure. "Don't you want none of it?" he inquired.

"It is yours," repeated Hollis. He reached out and grasped the boy by the arm, drawing him close. "Now tell me what you heard at the Fashion," he said.

Rapidly, but with rather less excitement in his manner than he had exhibited on his entrance, the boy related in detail the conversation he had overheard at the Fashion. When he had finished Hollis patted him approvingly on the back.

"The official circulation manager of the *Kicker* has made good," he said with a smile. "Now go home and take a good rest and be ready to deliver the *Kicker* next Saturday."

The boy backed away and stood looking at Hollis in surprise. "Why!" he said in an awed voice, "you ain't none scared a-tall!"

"I certainly am scared," laughed Hollis; "scared that Ten Spot will change his mind before six o'clock. Do you think he will?"

"No!" emphatically declared the boy. "I don't reckon that Ten Spot will change his mind a-tall. He'll sure come down here to shoot you!"

"That relieves me," returned Hollis dryly. "Now you go home. "But," he warned, "don't tell anyone that I am scared."

For an instant the boy looked at Hollis critically, searching his face with all a boy's unerring judgment for signs which would tell of insincerity. Seeing none, he deliberately stretched a hand out to Hollis, his lips wreathing into an approving grin.

"Durned if you ain't the stuff!" he declared. "I'm just bettin' that Ten Spot ain't scarin' you none!" Then he backed out of the door and, still grinning, disappeared.

After Jiggs had gone Hollis turned and smiled at Potter. "I suppose you know this man Ten Spot," he said. "Will he come?"

"He will come," returned Potter. His face was pale and his lips quivered a little as he continued: "Ten Spot is the worst of Dunlavey's set," he said; "a dangerous, reckless taker of human life. He is quick on the trigger and a dead shot. He is called Ten Spot because of the fact that once, with a gun in each hand, he shot all the spots from a ten of hearts at ten paces."

Hollis sat silent, thoughtfully stroking his chin. Potter smiled admiringly.

"I know that you don't like to run," he said; "you aren't that kind. But you haven't a chance with Ten Spot—unfortunately you haven't had much experience with a six-shooter." Potter's hands shook as he tried to resume work at the type case. "I didn't think they would have nerve enough for that game," he added, advancing again toward Hollis. "I rather thought they would try some other plan—something not quite so raw. But it seems they have nerve enough for anything. Hollis" he concluded dejectedly, "you've got to get out of town before six o'clock or Ten Spot will kill you!

"You've got plenty of time," he resumed as Hollis kept silent; "it's only a little after four. You can get on your horse and be almost at the Circle Bar at six. No one can blame you for not staying—everybody knows that you can't handle a gun fast enough to match Ten Spot. Maybe if you do light out and don't show up in town for a week or so this thing will blow over."

"Thank you very much for that advice, Potter," said Hollis slowly. "I appreciate the fact that you are thinking of my safety. But of course there is another side to the situation. You

of course realize that if I run now I am through here—no one would ever take me seriously after it had been discovered that I had been run out of town by Ten Spot.”

“That’s a fact,” admitted Potter. “But of course——”

“I think that is settled,” interrupted Hollis. “You can’t change the situation by argument. I’ve got to face it and face it alone. I’ve got to stay here until Ten Spot comes. If I can’t beat him at his game he wins and you can telegraph East to my people.” He rose and walked to the window, his back to the printer.

“You can knock off for to-day, Potter. Jump right on your pony and get out to Circle Bar. I wouldn’t say anything to Norton or anyone until after nine to-night and then if I don’t show up at the ranch you will know that Ten Spot has got me.”

He stood at the window while Potter slowly drew off his apron, carefully folded it and tucked it into a corner. He moved very deliberately, as though reluctant to leave his chief. Had Hollis shown the slightest sign of weakening Potter would have stayed. But watching closely he saw no sign of weakness in the impassive face of his chief, and so, after he had made his preparations for departure, he drew a deep breath

of resignation and walked slowly to the back door, where his pony was hitched. He halted at the threshold, looking back at his chief.

"Well, good-bye then," he said.

Hollis did not turn. "Good-bye," he answered.

Potter took one step outward, hesitated, and then again faced the front of the office.

"Damn it, Hollis," he said hoarsely, "don't wait for Ten Spot to start anything; when you see him coming in the door bore him. You've got a right to; that's the law in this country. When a man gives you notice to leave town you've got a right to shoot him on sight!"

For a moment he stood, awaiting an answer. None came. Potter sighed and stepped out through the door, leaving his chief alone.

At one minute to six Hollis pulled out his watch. He sighed, replaced the time-piece, and leaned back in his chair. A glance out through the window showed him that the street was deserted except for here and there a cow pony drooping over one of the hitching rails and a wagon or two standing in front of a store. The sun was coming slantwise over the roofs; Hollis saw that the strip of shade in front of the *Kicker* building had grown to wide proportions. He

looked at his watch again. It was one minute after six—and still there were no signs of Ten Spot.

A derisive grin appeared on Hollis's face. Perhaps Ten Spot had reconsidered. He decided that he would wait until ten minutes after six; that would give Ten Spot a decent margin of time for delay.

And then there was a sudden movement and a man stood just inside the office door, a heavy revolver in his right hand, its muzzle menacing Hollis. The man was tall and angular, apparently about thirty years old, with thin, cruel lips and insolent, shifty eyes.

"'Nds up!" he said sharply, swinging the revolver to a threatening poise. "It's six o'clock, you tenderfoot — — —!"

This was the vile epithet that had been applied to Hollis by Yuma Ed, which had been the direct cause of Yuma's downfall the day of Hollis's arrival in Dry Bottom. Hollis's eyes flashed, but the man was several feet from him and out of reach of his fists. Had Hollis been standing he would have had no chance to reach the man before the latter could have made use of his weapon. Therefore Hollis remained motionless in his chair, catching the man's gaze and holding it steadily with unwavering, narrowed eyes.

Though he had waited for the coming of Ten Spot, he had formulated no plan of action; he had felt that somehow he would come out of the clash with him without injury. He still thought so. In spite of his danger he felt that some chance of escape would be offered him. Grimly confident of this he smiled at the man, though still holding his gaze, determined, if he saw the faintest flicker of decision in his eyes, to duck and tackle him regardless of consequences.

"I suppose you are Ten Spot?" he said slowly. He was surprised at the steadiness of his voice.

The man grinned, his eyes alert, shifty, filled with a chilling menace. "You've got her right, tenderfoot," he said; "'Ten Spot's' m' handle, an' if you're a-feelin' like criticizin' of her do her some rapid before I starts dealin' out the lead which is in my pritty."

Just how one man could be so entirely remorseless as to shoot another when that other man was looking straight into his eyes Hollis could not understand. He could readily realize how a man could kill when provoked to anger, or when brooding over an injury. But he had done nothing to Ten Spot—did not even know him—had never seen him before, and how Ten Spot could deliberately shoot him—without pro-

vocation—was incomprehensible. He was convinced that in order to shoot, Ten Spot must work himself into an artificial rage, and he believed that the vile epithet which Ten Spot had applied to him immediately upon his entrance must be part of his scheme. He was convinced that had he shown the slightest resentment over the application of the epithet Ten Spot would have shot him down at once. Therefore he resolved to give the man no opportunity to work himself into a rage. He smiled again as Ten Spot concluded and carelessly twisted himself about in his chair until he was in a position to make a quick spring.

“‘Ten Spot’ is a picturesque name,” he remarked quietly, not removing his gaze from Ten Spot’s eyes for the slightest fraction of a second; “I have no criticism to make. I have always made it a point to refrain from criticizing my visitors. At least I do not recollect ever having criticized a visitor who carried a gun,” he concluded with a smile.

Ten Spot’s lips curled sarcastically. Apparently he would not swerve in his determination to provoke trouble.

“Hell,” he said truculently, “that there palaver makes me sick. I reckon you’re too damn white livered to criticize a man that’s lookin’ at

you. There ain't no tenderfoot (here he applied the unprintable epithet again) got nerve enough to criticize nothin'!"

Hollis slowly raised his hands and placed them on the arms of his chair, apparently to steady himself, but in reality to be ready to project himself out of the chair in case he could discern any indication of action on Ten Spot's part.

"Ten Spot," he said in a low, even, well controlled voice, conciliatory, but filled with a manliness which no man could mistake, "at four o'clock this afternoon I heard that you and Yuma Ed were framing up your present visit. I am not telling who gave me the information," he added as he saw Ten Spot's eyes brighten, "but that is what happened. So you see I know what you have come for. You have come to kill me. Is that correct?"

Ten Spot's eyes narrowed—into them had come an appraising, speculative glint. He nodded. "You've got her right," he admitted gruffly. "But if you knowed why didn't you slope?" He looked at Hollis with a half sneer, as though unable to decide whether Hollis was a brave man or merely a fool.

Hollis saw the indecision in Ten Spot's eyes and his own brightened. At last he had planned a form of action and he coolly estimated the dis-

tance between himself and Ten Spot. While Hollis had been speaking Ten Spot had taken a step forward and he was now not over four or five feet distant. Into Ten Spot's eyes had come an amused, disdainful gleam; Hollis's quiet, argumentative attitude had disarmed him. This was exactly what Hollis had been waiting for.

Ten Spot seemed almost to have forgotten his weapon; it had sagged, the muzzle pointing downward—the man's mind had become temporarily diverted from his purpose. When he saw Hollis move suddenly forward he remembered his gun and tried to swing its muzzle upward, but it was too late. Hollis had lunged forward, his left hand closing on Ten Spot's right wrist, his right fist reaching Ten Spot's jaw in a full, sweeping, crashing uppercut.

The would-be killer did not have even time enough to pull the trigger of his six-shooter. It fell from his hand and thudded dully to the floor as his knees doubled under him and he collapsed in an inert, motionless heap near the door.

With a grim smile on his face Hollis picked up Ten Spot's weapon and placed it on the desk. For an instant he stood at the window, looking out into the street. Down near the Fashion he saw some men—Yuma Ed among them. No doubt they were waiting the sound of the pistol

shot which would tell them that Ten Spot had disposed of Hollis. Hollis grinned widely—Yuma and his gang were due for a surprise. For perhaps a minute Hollis stood beside the desk, watching Ten Spot. Then when the latter's hands began to twitch and a trace of color appeared in his face, Hollis pulled out his own revolver and approached him, standing within a few feet of him and looking down at him.

There was no mark on Ten Spot's jaw to show where Hollis's blow had landed, for his fist had struck flush on the point, its force directed upward. Ten Spot's mouth had been open at the instant and the snapping of his teeth from the impact of the blow no doubt had much to do with his long period of unconsciousness.

He stirred presently and then with an effort sat up and looked at his conqueror with a glance of puzzled wonderment. Seeing Hollis's weapon and his own on the desk, the light of past events seemed to filter into his bewildered brain. He grinned owlishly, felt of his jaw and then bowed his head, a flush of shame overspreading his face.

"Herd-rode!" he said dismally. "Herd-rode, an' by a tenderfoot! Oh, Lordy!" He suddenly looked up at Hollis, his eyes flashing with rage and defiance.

"Damn your hide, why don't you shoot?" he

demanded. He placed his hands, palm down, on the floor, preparatory to rising, but ceased his efforts when he heard Hollis's voice, coldly humorous:

"I shall shoot you just the instant you get to your feet. I rather think that I am running things here now."

Ten Spot sagged back and looked up at him. "Why I reckon you are," he said. No method of action having suggested itself to him, he continued to sit, watching Hollis narrowly.

The latter retreated to his chair and dropped into it, moving deliberately. When he spoke his voice was cold and metallic.

"When you first came into the office," he said, "you applied a vile epithet to me. Once after that you did it again. You have asked me why I don't shoot you. If you really want me to shoot you you can keep your mouth closed for just one minute. If you want to continue to live you can tell me that you didn't mean a word of what you said on those two occasions. It's up to you." He sat silent, looking steadily at Ten Spot.

The latter fidgeted, shame again reddening his cheeks. "Why," he said finally, "I reckon she don't go, tenderfoot. You see, she's only a noma de ploom which we uses when we wants to

rile somebody. I cert'nly didn't mean nothin' by it."

"Thanks," drawled Hollis dryly; "I'll call that sufficient. But you certainly did 'rile' me some."

"I reckon I must have done just that," grinned Ten Spot ruefully. "You're shorely some she-wolf with them there claws of your'n. An' I done laffed at Dunlavey an' Yuma after you'd clawed them." His face sobered, his eyes suddenly filling with an expression of defiant resignation.

"I reckon when you're done trifflin' with me you c'n start to pumpin' your lead," he said. "There ain't no use of prolongin' the agony." He looked steadily at Hollis, his eyes filling with decision as he again placed his hands beside him on the floor to rise.

"You c'n open the ball when you get damn good an' ready," he sneered, "but I'm gettin' up right now. I ain't goin' to die off my pins like a damn coyote!"

He rose quickly, plainly expecting to be shot down the moment he reached his feet. When he discovered that Hollis evidently intended to delay the fatal moment he stiffened, his lips twitching queerly.

"Ten Spot," said Hollis quietly, "by apolo-

gizing for what you said when you came in you have shown that there is a great deal of the man left in you despite your bad habits and associations. I am going to show you that I think there is enough of the man left in you to trust you with your gun."

He turned abruptly to the desk and took up Ten Spot's weapon, holding it by the muzzle and presenting it to the latter. Ten Spot looked from the weapon to Hollis and back again to the weapon, blank amazement pictured on his face. Then he reached out mechanically, taking the weapon and holding it in his hands, turning it over and over as though half inclined to believe that it was not a revolver at all.

"Chuck full of cattridges, too!" he exclaimed in amazement, as he examined the chambers. "Why, hell——" He crouched and deftly swung the six-shooter around, the butt in his hand, his finger resting on the trigger. In this position he looked at Hollis.

The latter had not moved, but his own weapon was in his right hand, its muzzle covering Ten Spot, and when the latter swung his weapon up Hollis smiled grimly at him.

"Using it?" he questioned.

For an instant it seemed that Ten Spot would. An exultant, designing expression came into his

eyes, he grinned, his teeth showing tigerishly. Then suddenly he snapped himself erect and with a single, dexterous movement holstered the weapon. Then his right hand came suddenly out toward Hollis.

"Shake!" he said. "By ——, you're white!"

Hollis smiled as he returned the hearty hand-clasp.

"You're cert'nly plum grit," assured Ten Spot as he released Hollis's hand and stepped back the better to look at the latter. "But I reckon you're some damn fool too. How did you know that I wouldn't turn you into a colander when you give me back my gun?"

"I didn't know," smiled Hollis. "I just took a chance. You see," he added, "it was this way. I never intended to shoot you. That sort of thing isn't in my line and I don't intend to shoot anyone if there is any way out of it. But I certainly wasn't going to allow you to shoot me." He smiled oddly. "So I watched my chance and slugged you. Then when I was certain that you weren't dangerous any more I had to face another problem. If I had turned you loose after taking your gun what would you have done?"

"I'd have gone out an' rustled another gun an' come back here an' salivated you."

"That's just what you would have done," smiled Hollis. "I intend to stay in this country, Ten Spot, and if I had turned you loose without an understanding you would have shot me at the first opportunity. As it stands now you owe me——"

"As it stands now," interrupted Ten Spot, a queer expression on his face, "I'm done shootin' as far as you're concerned." He walked to the door, hesitated on the threshold and looked back. "Mister man," he said slowly, "mebbe you won't lick Big Bill in this here little mix-up, but I'm telling you that you're goin' to give him a damn good run for his money! So-long."

He stepped down and disappeared. For a moment Hollis looked after him, and then he sat down at the desk, his face softening into a satisfied smile. It was something to receive a tribute from a man like Ten Spot.

CHAPTER X

THE LOST TRAIL

IT was after seven o'clock when Hollis mounted his pony in the rear of the *Kicker* office and rode out over the plains toward the Circle Bar. He was properly elated by the outcome of his affair with Ten Spot. The latter had come to the *Kicker* office as an enemy looking for an opportunity to kill. He had left the office, perhaps not a friend, but at least a neutral, sympathetic onlooker, for according to Hollis's interpretation of his words at parting he would take no further part in Dunlavey's campaign—at least he would do no more shooting.

Hollis was compelled to make a long detour in order to strike the Circle Bar trail, and when at seven-thirty o'clock he rode down through a dry arroyo toward a little basin which he must cross to reach a ridge that had been his landmark during all his trips back and forth from Dry Bottom to the Circle Bar, dusk had fallen and the shadows of the oncoming night were settling somberly down over the plains.

He rode slowly forward; there was no reason for haste, for he had told Potter to say nothing about the reason of his delay in leaving Dry Bottom, and Potter would not expect him before nine o'clock. Hollis had warmed toward Potter this day; there had been in the old printer's manner that afternoon a certain solicitous concern and sympathy that had struck a responsive chord in his heart. He was not a sentimentalist, but many times during his acquaintance with Potter he had felt a genuine pity for the man. It had been this sentiment which had moved him to ask Potter to remove temporarily to the Circle Bar, though one consideration had been the fact at the Circle Bar he would most of the time be beyond the evil influence of Dry Bottom's saloons. That Potter appreciated this had been shown by his successful fight against temptation the night before, when postponement of the publication of the *Kicker* would have been fraught with serious consequences.

Riding down through the little basin at the end of the arroyo Hollis yielded to a deep, stirring satisfaction over the excellent beginning he had made in his fight against Dunlavey and the interests behind him. Many times he smiled, thinking of the surprise his old friends in the East must have felt over the perusal of their

copies of the *Kicker*; over the information that he—who had been something of a figure in Eastern newspaperdom—had become the owner and editor of a newspaper in a God-forsaken town in New Mexico, and that at the outset he was waging war against interests that ridiculed a judge of the United States Court. He smiled grimly. They might be surprised, but they must feel, all who knew him, that he would stay and fight until victory rewarded him or until black, bitter defeat became his portion. There could be no compromise.

When he reached the ridge toward which he had been riding for the greater part of an hour night had come. The day had been hot, but there had been a slight breeze, and in the *Kicker* office, with the front and rear doors open, he had not noticed the heat very much. But just as he reached the ridge he became aware that the breeze had died down; that waves of hot, sultry air were rising from the sun-baked earth. Usually at this time of the night there were countless stars, and now as he looked up into the great, vast arc of sky he saw no stars at all except away down in the west in a big rift between some mountains. He pulled up his pony and sat motionless in the saddle, watching the sky. A sudden awe for the grandeur of the scene

filled him. He remembered to have seen nothing quite like it in the East.

Back toward Dry Bottom, and on the north and south, rose great, black thunderheads with white crests, seeming like mountains with snow-capped peaks. Between the thunder-heads were other clouds, of grayish-white, fleecy, wind-whipped, wierd shapes, riding on the wings of the Storm-Kings. Other clouds flanked these, moving slowly and majestically—like great ships on the sea—in striking contrast to the fleecy, unstable shapes between the thunder-heads, which, though rushing always onward, were riven and broken by the irresistible force behind them. To Hollis it seemed there were two mighty opposing forces at work in the sky, marshalling, maneuvering, preparing for conflict. While he sat motionless in the saddle watching, a sudden gust of cold wind swirled up around him, dashed some fine, flint-like sand against his face and into his eyes, and then swept onward. He was blinded for an instant, and allowed the reins to drop on his pony's neck while he rubbed his eyes with his fingers. He sat thus through an ominous hush and then to his ears came a low, distant rumble.

He touched his pony lightly on the flanks with his spurs and headed it along the ridge, con-

vinced that a storm was coming and suddenly realizing that he was many miles from shelter.

He had traveled only a little distance when clouds of sand and dust, wind-driven, enveloped him, blinding him again, stinging his face and hands and blotting out the landmarks upon which he depended to guide him to the Circle Bar. The sky had grown blacker; even the patch of blue that he had seen in the rift between the distant mountains was now gone. There was nothing above him—it seemed—except inky black clouds, nothing below but chaos and wind. He could not see a foot of the trail and so he gave the pony the rein, trusting to its instinct.

When Norton had provided him with an outfit the inevitable tarpaulin had not been neglected. Hollis remembered that this was attached to the cantle of the saddle, and so, after he had proceeded a little way along the crest of the ridge, he halted the pony, dismounted, unstrapped the tarpaulin, and folded it about him. Then he remounted and continued on his way, mentally thanking Norton for his foresight.

The pony had negotiated the ridge; had slowly loped down its slope to a comparatively low and level stretch of country, and was traveling steadily forward, when Hollis noticed a

change in the atmosphere. It had grown hot again—sultry; the heat seemed to cling to him. An ominous calm had succeeded the aerial disturbance. From a great distance came a slight sound—a gentle sighing—gradually diminishing until it died away entirely. Then again came the ominous, premonitory silence—an absolute absence of life and movement. Hollis urged the pony forward, hoping the calm would last until he had covered a goodly part of the distance to the Circle Bar. For a quarter of an hour he went on at a good pace. But he had scarcely reached the edge of a stretch of broken country—which he dreaded even in the daylight—when the storm was upon him.

It did not come unheralded. A blinding flash of lightning illuminated miles of the surrounding country, showing Hollis the naked peaks of ridges and hills around him; gullies, draws, barrancas, the levels, lava beds, fantastic rock shapes—mocking his ignorance of the country. He saw them all for an instant and then they were gone and darkness—blacker than before—succeeded. It was as though a huge map had suddenly been thrust before his eyes by some giant hand, an intense light thrown upon it, and the light suddenly turned off. Immediately there came a heavy crash as though the Storm-

Kings, having marshalled their forces, had thrown them together in one, great, clashing onrush. And then, straight down, roaring and shrieking, came the deluge.

The wise little plains-pony halted, standing with drooping head, awaiting the end of the first fierce onslaught. It lasted long and when it had gone another silence, as ominous as the preceding one, followed. The rain ceased entirely and the pony again stepped forward, making his way slowly, for the trail was now slippery and hazardous. The baked earth had become a slimy, sticky clay which clung tenaciously to the pony's hoofs.

For another quarter of an hour the pony floundered through the mud, around gigantic boulders, over slippery hummocks, across little gullies, upon ridges and small hills and down into comparatively level stretches of country. Hollis was beginning to think that he might escape a bad wetting after all when the rain came again.

This time it seemed the Storm-Kings were in earnest. The rain came down in torrents; Hollis could feel it striking against his tarpaulin in long, stinging, vicious slants, and the lightning played and danced along the ridges and into the gullies with continuing energy, the thunder fol-

lowing, crashing in terrific volleys. It was uncomfortable, to say the least, and the only consoling thought was that the deluge would prove a God-send to the land and the cattle. Hollis began to wish that he had remained in Dry Bottom for the night, but of course Dry Bottom was not to be thought of now; he must devote all his energy to reaching the ranch.

It was slow work for the pony. After riding for another quarter of an hour Hollis saw, during another lightning flash, another of his landmarks, and realized that in the last quarter of an hour he had traveled a very short distance. The continuing flashes of lightning had helped the pony forward, but presently the lightning ceased and a dense blackness succeeded. The pony went forward at an uncertain pace; several times it halted and faced about, apparently undecided about the trail. After another half hour's travel and coming to a stretch of level country, the pony halted again, refusing to respond to Hollis's repeated urging to go forward without guidance. For a long time Hollis continued to urge the animal—he cajoled, threatened—but the pony would not budge. Hollis was forced to the uncomfortable realization that it had lost the trail.

For a long time he sat quietly in the saddle,

trying in the dense darkness to determine upon direction, but he finally gave it up and with a sudden impulse took up the reins and pulled the pony to the left, determined to keep to the flat country as long as possible.

He traveled for what seemed several miles, the pony gingerly feeling its way, when suddenly it halted and refused to advance. Something was wrong. Hollis leaned forward, attempting to peer through the darkness ahead, but not succeeding. And now, as though having accomplished its design by causing Hollis to lose the trail, the lightning flashed again, illuminating the surrounding country for several miles.

Hollis had been peering ahead when the flash came and he drew a deep breath of horror and surprise. The pony had halted within a foot of the edge of a high cliff whose side dropped away sheer, as though cut with a knife. Down below, perhaps a hundred feet, was an immense basin, through which flowed a stream of water. To Hollis's right, parallel with the stream, the cliff sloped suddenly down, reaching the water's edge at a distance of two or three hundred feet. Beyond that was a stretch of sloping country many miles in area, and, also on his right, was a long, high, narrow ridge. He recognized the ridge as the one on which he and Norton had ridden

some six weeks before—on the day he had had the adventure with Ed Hazelton. Another flash of lightning showed him two cotton-wood trees—the ones pointed out to him by Norton as marking Big Elk crossing—the dead line set by Dunlavey and his men.

Hollis knew his direction now and he pulled the pony around and headed it away from the edge of the cliff and toward the flat country which he knew led down through the canyon to Devil's Hollow, where he had taken leave of Ed and Nellie Hazelton. He was congratulating himself upon his narrow escape when a flash of lightning again illuminated the country and he saw, not over a hundred feet distant, sitting motionless on their ponies, a half dozen cowboys. Also on his pony, slightly in advance of the others, a grin of derision on his face, was Dunlavey.

CHAPTER XI

PICKING UP THE TRAIL

AT about the time that the storm had overtaken Hollis, Potter was unsaddling his pony at the Circle Bar corral gate. A little later he was on the wide lower gallery of the ranchhouse washing the stains of travel from his face and hands. At supper he was taciturn, his face deeply thoughtful. Had Ten Spot come? What had been the outcome of the meeting? These questions preyed on his mind and brought furrows into his face.

At supper he caught Norton watching him furtively and he flushed guiltily, for he felt that in spite of Hollis's order to say nothing to Norton he should have told. He had already informed Norton that Hollis intended remaining in Dry Bottom until a later hour than usual, but he had said nothing about the intended visit of Ten Spot to the *Kicker* office. Loyalty to Hollis kept him from communicating to Norton his fears for Hollis's safety. It was now too late to do anything if he did tell Norton; whatever had

been done had been done already and there was nothing for him to do but to wait until nine o'clock.

After he finished his meal he drew a chair out upon the gallery and placing it in a corner from where he could see the Dry Bottom trail he seated himself in it and tried to combat the disquieting fears that oppressed him. When Norton came out and took a chair near him he tried to talk to the range boss upon those small subjects with which we fill our leisure, but he could not hold his thoughts to these trivialities. He fell into long silences; his thoughts kept going back to Dry Bottom.

When the rain came he felt a little easier, for he had a hope that Hollis might have noticed the approach of the storm and decided to remain in town until it had passed. But after the rain had ceased his fears again returned. He looked many times at his watch and when Mrs. Norton came to the door and announced her intention of retiring he scarcely noticed her. Norton had repeatedly referred to Hollis's absence, and each time Potter had assured him that Hollis would come soon. Shortly before nine o'clock, when the clouds lifted and the stars began to appear, Potter rose and paced the gallery floor. At nine, when it had become light enough to see

quite a little distance down the Dry Bottom trail and there were still no signs of Hollis, he blurted out the story of the day's occurrences.

The information acted upon Norton like an electric shock. He was on his feet before Potter had finished speaking, grasping him by the shoulders and shaking him roughly.

"Why didn't you say something before?" he demanded. "Why did you leave him? Wasn't there somebody in Dry Bottom that you could have sent out here to tell me?" He cursed harshly. "Ten Spot's got him!" he declared sharply, his eyes glittering savagely. "He'd have been here by this time!" He was taking a hitch in his cartridge belt while talking, and before concluding he was down off the gallery floor and striding toward the corral.

"Tell my wife that I've gone to Dry Bottom," he called back to Potter. "Important business! I'll be back shortly after midnight!"

Leaving Potter on the porch staring after him he ran to the corral, roped his pony, threw on a saddle and bridle and mounted with the animal on a run.

The stars were shining brilliantly now and from the porch Potter could see Norton racing down the Dry Bottom trail with his pony in a furious gallop. For a time Potter watched him,

then he disappeared and Potter went into the house to communicate his message to his wife.

The rain had been heavy while it lasted, but by the time Norton had begun his race to Dry Bottom very little evidence of it remained and the pony's flying hoofs found the sand of the trail almost as dry and hard as before the storm. Indeed, there was now little evidence that there had been a storm at all.

Norton spared the pony only on the rises and in something over an hour after the time he had left the Circle Bar he drew up in front of the *Kicker* office in Dry Bottom, dismounted, and bounded to the door. It was locked. He placed a shoulder against it and crashed it in, springing inside and lighting a match. He smiled grimly when he saw no signs of Hollis; when he saw that the interior was in an orderly condition and that there were no signs of a conflict. If Ten Spot had killed Hollis he had done the deed outside the *Kicker* office.

Norton came out again, pulling the wreck of the door after him and closing it as well as he could. Then, leaving his pony, he strode toward the Fashion saloon. As he came near he heard sounds of revelry issuing from the open door and he smiled coldly. A flashing glance through the window showed him that Ten Spot

was there, standing at the bar. In the next instant Norton was inside, confronting Ten Spot, his big six-shooter out and shoved viciously against Ten Spot's stomach.

"What have you done with Hollis, you mangy son-of-a-gun?" he demanded.

Several men who had been standing at the bar talking and laughing fell silent and looked at the two men, the barkeeper sidled closer, crouching warily, for he knew Norton.

Ten Spot had spread his arms out on the bar and was leaning against it, looking at Norton in unfeigned bewilderment. He did not speak at once. Then suddenly aware of the foreboding, savage gleam in Norton's eyes, a glint of grim humor came into his own and his lips opened a little, curling sarcastically.

"Why," he said, looking at Norton, "I don't reckon to be anyone's keeper." He smiled widely, with a suddenly ludicrous expression. "If you're talkin' about that tenderfoot noos-paper guy, he don't need no keeper. What have I done to him?" he repeated, his smile growing. "Why, I reckon I didn't do a heap. I went down to call on him. He was right sociable. I was goin' to be mean to him, but I just couldn't. When he left he was sayin' that he'd be right glad to see me again—he'd been right

playful durin' my talk with him. I reckon by now he's over at the Circle Bar laffin' hisself to sleep over the mean way I treated him. You just ast him when you see him."

A flicker of doubt came into Norton's eyes—Ten Spot's words had the ring of truth.

"You went down there to shoot him!" he said coldly, still unconvinced.

"Mebbe I did," returned Ten Spot. "However, I didn't. I ain't tellin' how I come to change my mind—that's my business, an' you can't shoot it out of me. But I'm tellin' you this: me an' that guy has agreed to call it quits, an' if I hear any man talkin' extravagant about him, me an' that man's goin' to have a run in mighty sudden!" He laughed. "Someone's been funnin' you," he said. "When he handed me back my gun after sluggin'——"

But he was now talking to Norton's back, for the range boss was at the door, striding rapidly toward his pony. He mounted again and rode out on the trail, proceeding slowly, convinced that something had happened to Hollis after he had left Dry Bottom. It was more than likely that he had lost his way in the storm, and in that case he would probably arrive at the Circle Bar over some round-about trail. He was now certain that he had not been molested in town; if

he had been some of the men in the Fashion would have told him about it. Hollis would probably be at the ranch by the time he arrived, to laugh at his fears. Nevertheless he rode slowly, watching the trail carefully, searching the little gullies and peering into every shadow for fear that Hollis had been injured in some accident and might be lying near unable to make his presence known.

The dawn was just showing above the horizon when he rode up to the ranchhouse to find Potter standing on the porch—apparently not having left there during his absence. Beside Potter stood Ed Hazelton, and near the latter a drooping pony, showing signs of hard riding.

Norton passed the corral gate and rode up to the two men. A glance at their faces told him that something had gone wrong. But before he could speak the question that had formed on his lips Hazelton spoke.

“They got him, Norton,” he said slowly.

“Dead?” queried Norton sharply, his lips straightening.

“No,” returned Hazelton gloomily; “he ain’t dead. But when I found him he wasn’t far from it. Herd-rode him, the damned sneaks! Beat him up so’s his own mother wouldn’t know him!”

“Wait!” commanded Norton. “I’m going with you. I suppose you’ve got him over to your shack?” He caught Hazelton’s nod and issued an order to Potter. “Go down to the bunkhouse and get Weary out. Tell him to hit the breeze to Cimarron for the doctor. If the doc’ don’t want to come drag him by the ears!”

He spurred his pony furiously to the corral gate and in a short time had saddled another horse and was back where Hazelton was awaiting him. Without speaking a word to each other the two men rode rapidly down the Coyote trail, while Potter, following directions, his face haggard and drawn from loss of sleep and worry, hurried to the bunkhouse to arouse Weary and send him on his long journey to Cimarron.

CHAPTER XII

AFTER THE STORM

HOLLIS'S tall figure lay pitifully slack on a bed in the Hazelton cabin. Nellie Hazelton had given him what care she could out of her limited knowledge and now nothing more could be done until the arrival of the Cimarron doctor. Swathed in bandages, his clothing torn and soiled—as though after beating him his assailants had dragged him through the mud—one hand quietly twisted, his face swollen, his whole great body looking as though it had received the maximum of injury, Hollis moved restlessly on the bed, his head rolling oddly from side to side, incoherent words issuing from between his bruised and swollen lips.

Norton stood beside the bed, looking down at the injured man with a grim, savage pity.

“The damned cowards!” he said, his voice quivering. “There must have been a dozen of them—to do him up like that!”

“Seven,” returned Ed Hazelton grimly. “They left their trail there; I counted the hoof

prints, an' they led down the slope toward Big Elk crossin'." He looked at Norton with a frown. "We can't do anything here," he said shortly, "until the doctor comes. I'll take you down where I found him."

They went out and mounted their ponies. Down the trail a mile or so they came to a level that led away toward Rabbit-Ear Creek. From the level they could see the Circle Cross buildings, scattered over a small stretch of plain on the opposite side of the river. There was no life around them, no movement. Norton grimaced toward them.

Hazelton halted his pony in some tall grass near a bare, sandy spot on the plains. The grass here grew only in patches and Norton could plainly see a number of hoof prints in the sand. One single set led away across the plains toward the Dry Bottom trail. Seeing the knowing expression in Norton's eyes, Hazelton spoke quietly.

"That's Hollis's trail. He must have took the Dry Bottom trail an' lost it in the storm. Potter says he would probably take it because it's shorter. Anyways, it's his trail; I followed it back into the hills until I was sure. I saw that he had been comin' from Dry Bottom. He lost his way an' rode over here. I remember

there was an awful darkness, for I was out scoutin' around to see if my stock was all right. Well, he got this far—rode right up to the edge of the butte over there an' then come back this way. Then he met—well, the men that did it."

"They all stood there for a little while; you can see where their horses pawed. Then mebber they started somethin'; for you can see where Hollis's pony throwed up a lot of sand, tryin' to break out. The others were in a circle—you can see that. I've figured it out that Hollis saw there wasn't any chance for him against so many an' he tried to hit the breeze away from here. I'll show you."

They followed the hoof prints down the slope and saw that all the riders must have been traveling fast at this point, for the earth was cut and the hoof prints bunched fore and aft. They ran only a little way, however. About a hundred yards down the slope, in a stretch of bare, sandy soil, the horses had evidently come to a halt again, for they were bunched well together and there were many of them, showing that there had been some movement after the halt.

Norton dismounted and examined the surrounding soil.

"They all got off here," he said shortly, after the examination; "there's the prints of their

boots. They caught him here and handed it to him."

Hazelton silently pointed to a queer track in the sand—a shallow groove running about fifty feet, looking as though some heavy object had been drawn over it. Norton's face whitened.

"Drug him!" he said grimly, his lips in two straight lines. "It's likely they roped him!" He remounted his pony and sat in the saddle, watching Hazelton as the latter continued his examination. "They're a fine, nervy bunch!" he sneered as Hazelton also climbed into his saddle. "They must have piled onto him like a pack of wolves. If they'd have come one at a time he'd have cleaned them up proper!"

They rode away down the trail toward the cabin. Norton went in and looked again at Hollis, and then, telling Hazelton that he would return in the afternoon, he departed for the Circle Bar. He stopped at the ranchhouse and communicated the news to his wife and Potter and then rode on up the river to a point about ten miles from the ranchhouse—where the outfit was working.

The men received his news with expressions of rage and vengeance. They had come to admire Hollis for his courage in electing to continue the fight against Dunlavey; they had seen that in

spite of his ignorance of the customs of their world he possessed a goodly store of common sense and an indomitable spirit. Yet none of them expressed sympathy, though their faces showed that they felt it. Expressions of sympathy in a case such as this would have been unnecessary and futile. But their expressions of rage showed how the news had affected them. Though they knew that Dunlavey's forces outnumbered their own they were for striking back immediately. But Norton discouraged this.

"We're layin' low for a while," he said. "Mebbe the boss will get well. If he does he'll make things mighty interestin' for Dunlavey—likely he'll remember who was in the crowd which beat him up. If he dies——" His eyes flashed savagely. "Well, if he dies you boys can go as far as you like an' I'll go with you without doin' any kickin'."

"What's goin' to be done with that noospaper of his'n?" inquired Ace. "You reckon she'll miss fire till he's well again?"

Norton's brows wrinkled; he had not thought of the newspaper. But he realized now that if the paper failed to appear on scheduled time the people in Union County would think that Hollis had surrendered; they would refuse to believe that he had been so badly injured that he

could not issue the paper, and Dunlavey would be careful to circulate some sort of a story to encourage this view. Now that Ace had brought the matter to his attention he began to suspect that this had been the reason of the attack on Hollis. That they had not killed him when they had the opportunity, showed that they must have had some purpose other than that of merely desiring to get him out of the way. That they had merely beaten him showed that their wish was only to incapacitate him temporarily. Norton's eyes flashed with a sudden determination.

"I don't reckon that the *Kicker* will miss fire," he declared; "not if I have to go to Dry Bottom an' get her out myself!"

Ace eyed him furtively and now spoke with an embarrassed self-consciousness.

"I've been considerin' this here situation ever since you told us about the boss," he said diffidently, "an' if you're goin' to get that paper out, a little poem or two might help out considerable."

"Meanin'?" interrogated Norton, his eyelashes flickering.

Ace's face reddened painfully. "Meanin' that I've got several little pieces which I've wrote when I didn't have anything else to do an' that I'd be right willin' to have them put into the

Kicker to help fill her up. Some of the boys think they're right classy."

Norton looked around at the other men for confirmation of the truth of this modest statement. He caught Lanky's glance.

"I reckon that's about right," said that sober-faced puncher; "Ace is the pote lariat of this here outfit, an' he sure has got a lot of right clever lines in his pomes. I've read them which wasn't one-two-three with his'n."

Norton smiled, a little cynically. He wasn't quite sure about it, he said, but if Ace could write poetry he hadn't any doubt that during the next few weeks there would be plenty of opportunity to print some of it in the *Kicker*. He smiled when he saw Ace's face brighten. But he told him he would have to see Hollis—if the latter got well enough to endure an interview. If the boss recovered enough to be able to look at Ace's poetry before it was printed, why of course it would have to be shown him. He didn't want anything to go into the *Kicker* which the boss wouldn't like. But if he wasn't able to look at it, why he would leave the decision to Potter, and if it suited the latter he would be satisfied. He would keep the boys posted on the boss's condition. Then he rode away toward the ranchhouse.

Late in the afternoon he again visited the Hazelton cabin. He found the Cimarron doctor already there. Hollis was still unconscious, though resting easier. The doctor declared that he would remain with him throughout the night. He followed Norton out on to the porch and told him that at present he could not tell just how serious Hollis's injuries were. There was a great wound in his head which he feared might turn out seriously, but if not, Hollis would recover quickly and be as good as ever within a few weeks—except for his left wrist—which was broken. He praised Nellie Hazelton for the care she was giving the injured man. Convinced that there was nothing more to be done, Norton returned to the Circle Bar to give his attention to his work.

CHAPTER XIII

“WOMAN—SHE DON’T NEED NO TOOTER”

THE Cimarron doctor’s fears for the wound on Hollis’s head had proved unfounded and on the tenth day after his experience on the night of the storm, Hollis was sitting on the Hazelton porch, his head still swathed in bandages, his left wrist in a splint, but his spirit still untouched. The marks on his face had all disappeared, except an ugly gash under his right eye—which still showed a slight discoloration—and a smaller cut on the chin. The Cimarron doctor had told him that the wound under his eye would leave a permanent scar—the wound had been deep and in spite of the doctor’s care, had drawn together queerly, affecting the eye itself and giving it an odd expression. Many times since becoming able to move about had Hollis looked at his face in his mirror, and each time there had come into his eyes an expression that boded ill for the men who had been concerned in the attack on him.

It was mid-afternoon and the sun was coming slant-wise over the roof of the cabin, creating a welcome shade on the porch. Ed Hazelton had been gone since morning, looking after his cattle, and Nellie was in the house, busily at work in the kitchen—Hollis could hear her as she stepped about the room.

Norton had left the cabin an hour before and a little later Potter had stopped in on his way over to Dry Bottom to set up an article that he had written at Hollis's dictation. Hollis had told Norton of his experiences on the night of the storm.

After the flash of lightning had revealed Dunlavey and his men, Hollis had attempted to escape, knowing that Dunlavey's intentions could not be peaceable, and that he would have no chance in a fight with several men. He had urged his pony toward the two buttes that he had seen during the lightning flash, making a circuit in order to evade his enemies. He might have succeeded, but unfortunately the darkness had lifted and they had been able to intercept him. He could give no clear account of what had happened after they had surrounded him. There had been no words spoken. He had tried to break out of the circle; had almost succeeded when a loop settled over his shoulders and he

was dragged from his pony—dragged quite a distance.

The fall had hurt him, but when the rope had slackened he had regained his feet—to see that all the men had surrounded him. One man struck at him and he had immediately struck back, knocking the man down. After that the blows came thick and fast. He hit several more faces that were close to him and at one time was certain he had put three of his assailants out of the fight. But the others had crowded him close. He fought them as well as he could with the great odds against him, and once was inspired with a hope that he might escape. Then had come a heavy blow on the head—he thought that one of the men had used the butt of a revolver. He could dimly remember receiving a number of other blows and then he knew nothing more until he had awakened in the Hazelton cabin.

Hollis's opinion of Dunlavey's motive in thus attacking him coincided with Norton's. They might easily have killed him. That they did not showed that they must have some peculiar motive. Aside from a perfectly natural desire on Dunlavey's part to deal to Hollis the same sort of punishment that Hollis had inflicted on Dunlavey on the occasion of their first meeting, the

latter could have no motive other than that of preventing the appearance of the *Kicker* on its regular publication day.

Hollis was convinced that Dunlavey had been inspired by both motives. But though Dunlavey had secured his revenge for the blow that Hollis had struck him in Dry Bottom, Hollis did not purpose to allow him to prevent the appearance of the *Kicker*. It had been impossible for him to make the trip to Dry Bottom, but he had summoned Potter and had dictated considerable copy, Potter had written some, and in this manner they had managed to get the *Kicker* out twice.

Ace had not been able to get any of his poems into the *Kicker*. He had submitted some of them to Potter, but the printer had assured him that he did not care to assume the responsibility of publishing them. Thereupon Ace had importuned Norton to intercede with Hollis on his behalf. On his visit this morning Norton had brought the matter to Hollis's attention. The latter had assured the range boss that he appreciated the puncher's interest and would be glad to go over some of his poems. Therefore Hollis was not surprised when in the afternoon he saw Ace loping his pony down the Coyote trail toward the Hazelton cabin.

Ace's approach was diffident, though ambition urged him on. He rode up to the edge of the porch, dismounted, and greeted his boss with an earnestness that contrasted oddly with his embarrassment. He took the chair that Hollis motioned him to, sitting on the edge of it and shifting nervously under Hollis's direct gaze.

"I reckon Norton told you about my poems," he began. He caught Hollis's nod and continued: "Well, I got a bunch of 'em here which I brung over to show you. Folks back home used to say that I was a genyus. But I reckon mebbe they was hittin' her up a little bit strong," he admitted, modestly; "folks is that way—they like to spread it on a bit. But"—and the eyes of the genius flashed proudly—"I reckon I've got a little talyunt, the evidence of which is right here!" With rather more composure than had marked his approach he now drew out a prodigious number of sheets of paper, which he proceeded to spread out on his knee, smoothing them lovingly.

"Mebbe I ain't much on spellin' an' grammar an' all that sort of thing," he offered, "but there's a heap of sense to be got out of the stuff I've wrote. Take this one, for instance. She's a little oday to 'Night,' which I composed while the boys was poundin' their ears one night—not

182 *THE COMING OF THE LAW*

bein' affected in their feelin's like I was. If you ain't got no objections I'll read her." And then, not waiting to hear any objections, he began:

The stars are bright to-night;
They surely are a sight,
Sendin' their flickerin' light
From an awful, unknown height.

Why do they shine so bright?
I'm most o'ercome with fright——

"Of course I reely wasn't scared," he offered with a deprecatory smile, "but there wasn't any other word that I could think of just then an' so I shoved her in. It rhymes anyhow an' just about says what I wanted."

He resumed:

When I look up into the night,
An' see their flickerin' light.

He ceased and looked at Hollis with an abashed smile. "It don't seem to sound so good when I'm readin' her out loud," he apologized. "An' I've thought that mebbe I've worked that 'night' an' 'light' rhyme over-time. But of course I've got 'fright' an' 'sight' an' 'height' in there to kind of off-set that." He squirmed

in his chair. “You take her an’ read her.” He passed the papers over to Hollis and rose from his chair. “I’ll be goin’ back to the outfit; Norton was sayin’ that he wanted me to look up some strays an’ I don’t want him to be waitin’ for me. But I’d like to have one of them pomes printed in the *Kicker*—just to show the folks in this here country that there’s a real pote in their midst.”

“Why——” began Hollis, about to express his surprise over his guest’s sudden determination to depart. But he saw Nellie Hazelton standing just outside the door, and the cause of Ace’s projected departure was no longer a mystery. He had gone before Hollis could have finished his remonstrance, and was fast disappearing in a cloud of dust down the trail when Hollis turned slowly to see Nellie Hazelton smiling broadly.

“I just couldn’t resist coming out,” she said. “It rather startled me to discover that there was a real poet in the country.”

“There seems to be no doubt of it,” returned Hollis with a smile. But he immediately became serious. “Ace means well,” he added. “I imagine that it wasn’t entirely an ambition to rush into print that moved him to submit his poems; he wants to help fill up the paper.”

Miss Hazelton laughed. "I really think," she said, looking after the departing poet, "that he might have been fibbing a little when he said that the 'night' had not 'scared' him. He ran from me," she added, amusement shining in her eyes, "and I should not like to think that any woman could appear so forbidding and mysterious as the darkness."

Hollis had been scanning one of the poems in his hand. He smiled whimsically at Miss Hazelton as she concluded.

"Here is Ace's opinion on that subject," he said. "Since you have doubted him I think it only fair that you should give him a hearing. Won't you read it?"

She came forward and seated herself in the chair that the poet had vacated, taking the mass of paper that Hollis passed over to her.

"Shall I read it aloud?" she asked with a smile at him.

"I think you had better not," he returned; "it might prove embarrassing."

She blushed and gave her attention to the poem. It was entitled: "Woman," and ran:

"Woman she dont need no tooter,
 be she skule mam or biscut shooter.
 she has most curyus ways about her,
 which leads a man to kinda dout her.

Though lookin at her is shure a pleasur
there aint no way to get her measure
i reckon she had man on the run
a long while before the world begun.

I met a biscut shooter in the chance saloon
when i was blowin my coin in ratoon
while the coin lasted i owned her an the town
but when it was gone she throwed me down.

An so i say she dont need no tooter
be she skule mam or biscut shooter
she fooled me an my hart she stole
which has opened my eyes an hurt my sole."

Miss Hazelton laid the manuscript in her lap
and laughed heartily.

"What a harrowing experience!" she declared. Hollis was grinning at her.

"That was a bad thing to have happen to a man," he observed; "I suppose it rather shattered Ace's faith in woman. At least you could observe by his actions just a moment ago that he isn't taking any more chances."

She fixed him with a defiant eye. "But he still admits that he takes pleasure in looking at a woman!" she told him triumphantly.

"So he does. Still, that isn't remarkable. You see, a man couldn't help that—no matter how badly he had been treated."

She had no reply to make to this, though she

gave him a look that he could not mistake. But he laughed. "I think Ace's effort ought to go into the *Kicker*," he said. "I have no doubt that many who read the poem will find in it a great deal of truth—perhaps a reflection of their own personal experiences."

Her face clouded and she regarded him a little soberly. "Of your own, perhaps?" she suggested.

"Not guilty," he returned laughing. "You see, I have never had any time to devote to the study of women, let alone time to allow them to fool me. Perhaps when I do have time to study them I may find some truth in Ace's effort."

"Then women do not interest you?" She was looking down the Coyote trail.

"Well, no," he said, thinking of the busy days of his past, and not being aware of the furtive, significant glance she threw toward him. "You see, there have always been so many important things to engage my attention."

"How fortunate!" she said mockingly, after a pause during which he had time to realize that he had been very ungracious. He saw Ace's manuscript flutter toward him, saw her rise and heard the screen door slam after her. During the remainder of the afternoon he was left alone on the porch to meditate upon the evils that arise from thoughtless speech.

CHAPTER XIV

THE COALITION

PERHAPS there were some persons in Union County who, acquainted with the details of the attack on Hollis, expected to read an account of it in the *Kicker*. If there were any such they were disappointed. There was nothing about the attack printed in the *Kicker*—nor did Hollis talk to any stranger concerning it.

Ace's poem entitled "Woman" had gone into the paper, causing the poet—for many days following the appearance of his composition—to look upon his fellow punchers with a sort of condescending pity. On the second day after his discussion with Miss Hazelton over Ace's poem Hollis returned to the Circle Bar. He had succeeded in convincing Nellie that he had answered thoughtlessly when he had informed her that he took no interest in women, and though she had defiantly assured him that she had not taken offense, there had been a light in her eyes upon his departure which revealed gratification over his

repentance. She stood long on the porch after he had taken leave of her, watching him as he rode slowly down the trail and disappeared around a turn. Then she smiled regretfully, sighed, and went into the house.

Hollis's return to the Circle Bar was unostentatious and quite in keeping with his method of doing things. Within the next few days he met several of the Circle Bar men and there were mutterings against Dunlavey, but Hollis discouraged action, assuring the mutters that his differences with Dunlavey were entirely personal and that he intended carrying on the fight alone.

His wounds mended rapidly, and within two weeks—except for the broken wrist—he was well as ever. Meanwhile Potter had succeeded in getting the *Kicker* out on time, though there had been a noticeable lack of aggressiveness in the articles. Especially was this true of the articles bearing upon the situation in Union County. Hollis had dictated some of these, but even those which he had dictated had seemed to lack something.

Nothing had been heard of Dunlavey—it seemed that after the attack upon Hollis he had withdrawn from the scene to await the latter's next move.

But Hollis was in no hurry; he had lost some of the enthusiasm that had marked his attitude in the beginning, but this enthusiasm had been replaced by determination. He was beginning to realize that in Dunlavey he had met a foe worthy of his most serious efforts. He had determined that there would be no repetition of the attack upon him, and therefore during his convalescence he had sent to Las Vegas for a repeating rifle, and this he carried with him on his trips to and from Dry Bottom.

Meanwhile the drought continued. The sky was cloudless, the desultory breezes that swept the plains blighted growing things, raising little whirlwinds of fine, flinty alkali dust and spreading it over the face of the world. The storm that had caught Hollis on the Dry Bottom trail had covered only a comparatively small area; it had lasted only a brief time and after its passage the country was dry as before.

Rabbit-Ear Creek of all the streams in the vicinity of Dry Bottom held water. From all points of the compass cattle drifted to the Rabbit-Ear, slaking their thirst and refusing to leave. Bronzed riders on drooping ponies trailed them, cutting them out, trying to keep their herds intact, but not succeeding. Confusion reigned. For miles in both directions Rabbit-

Ear Creek became one huge, long watering trough. Temporary camps were made; chuck wagons rattled up to them, loaded with supplies for the cowboys, and rattled back to distant ranches for more. There had been other droughts, but this one was unexpected—unprecedented. There had always been a little water everywhere. Now Rabbit-Ear Creek held all there was.

Only the small cattle owners suffered because of the drought. Riders told of the presence of plenty of water in the Canadian, the Cimarron, and the Ute. Carrizo held some. In fact, nearly all the streams held by the large ranchers seemed to contain plenty. The smaller owners, whose herds were smaller and whose complement of punchers was necessarily limited, had apparently been selected by Providence for ruin.

There were mutterings against the large owners, against Providence. Particularly were there mutterings against Dunlavey when word came to the owners of the herds that if the drought was not broken within the next ten days the Circle Cross manager would drive all foreign cattle from the Rabbit-Ear. He would not allow his own herds to suffer to save theirs, he said.

On the night following the day upon which the small owners had received this word from

Dunlavey a number of the former waited upon Hollis. They found him seated on the lower gallery of the ranchhouse talking to Norton and Potter. Lemuel Train, of the Pig-pen outfit, had been selected as their spokesman. He stood before Hollis, a big man, diffident in manner and rough in appearance, surrounded by his fellow ranchers, bronzed, bearded, serious of face. Though the sun had been down three hours the heat was frightful and the visitors shuffled their feet and uncomfortably wiped the perspiration from their brows.

"Sit down," invited Hollis. He rose and stood while the men draped themselves on the edge of the gallery floor—all except the spokesman, Lemuel Train. The latter faced Hollis. His face was grim in the dusk.

"We've come to see what you've got to say about water," he said.

Days before Norton had told Hollis that these men who were now herding at the Rabbit-Ear were the small ranchers who had refused to aid the elder Hollis in his fight against Dunlavey some years before. Therefore Hollis did not answer at once. When he did his voice was dry and cold. He too had heard of Dunlavey's ultimatum concerning the water.

"Before I say anything on that subject I

should like to know to whom I am talking," he said.

Train swept a ponderous hand toward his fellow visitors, pointing them out in turn. "There's Truxton, of the Diamond Dot; Holcomb, of the Star; Henningson, of the Three Bar; Yeager, of the Three Diamond; an' Clark, of the Circle Y."

"Correct," affirmed Norton, behind Hollis.

Hollis smiled grimly; he had caught a belligerent note in Norton's voice. Plainly, if the range boss were allowed a voice in the matter, these visitors would have now received as little encouragement as they had received from Dunlavey. But Hollis's smile showed that he held different views.

"I am Kent Hollis," he said to the men; "I suppose you know that."

"I reckon we know you," said Train; "you're Jim Hollis's boy."

"Then you know that Dunlavey and my father were not exactly bosom friends," returned Hollis.

Several heads bobbed affirmatively; others sat grimly silent. Hollis smiled.

"How many of you offered to help my father when he came to you asking for assistance in his fight against Dunlavey?"

Train fidgeted. "I reckon they wasn't much chance——" he began, and then hesitated, looking around at his fellows.

"Of course," returned Hollis quietly, after an embarrassed pause, "there wasn't much chance for you to win then. And you had to take a big risk to help my father. But he had to take a bigger risk to fight alone. Still he fought. And he fought alone. He was almost ruined. And now you men are facing ruin. And you have come to Jim Hollis's son to help you. Do you think he ought?"

The men sat silent; the spokesman was without words.

"How many men can the six of you muster—in case Dunlavey should try to carry out his decision to drive your cattle from the Rabbit-Ear—or shoot them?"

"Eighteen, I reckon," returned Train, looking at the others, who nodded affirmatively to his question.

Hollis turned to Norton. "How many men does Dunlavey employ?" he questioned.

"Thirty," snapped Norton. "But in case he needed them he c'n get a hundred."

"Big odds," smiled Hollis. "Why should I volunteer to help you fight Dunlavey. My cattle are certain of getting enough water. Why

should I not be selfish, as you men were when my father went to you for assistance?"

There was no answer. The faces that surrounded Hollis in the semi-darkness showed plainly that their owners had given up thoughts of assistance. Grim, hard lines came into them; two or three sneered. Of course they would fight Dunlavey; there was no alternative, for they could not stand idly by and see their cattle slain—Dunlavey could not drive them from water, they would have to be shot. They had reckoned on securing help from Hollis; he held one side of the Rabbit-Ear and with his support they were in a position to make things very unpleasant for any of Dunlavey's men who might, from the opposite side of the river, attempt to shoot their cattle. But with Hollis against them they would be powerless; with Hollis against them Dunlavey's men could swarm both sides of the river and the destruction of their cattle would be certain.

All of the men knew this. Yet they did not answer Hollis's question. They had not come to plead with him; they knew that the situation had narrowed down to a point where they could depend only on their own resources. They would not plead, yet as they silently started to file off the gallery there were bitter smiles on

several of their faces. There were no threats; perhaps Hollis had succeeded in showing them the similarity between his conduct and their own in the long ago, when his father had gone to them for assistance. At least this was what he had tried to show them.

Lemuel Train was the last man down the gallery. He turned as he reached the ground and looked back over his shoulder at Hollis.

"So-long," he said shortly. "I reckon you're even now."

Hollis had not moved. "Wait, Train!" he said. The visitors halted and faced him.

"Men," he said quietly, "you have not answered my question. I am going to repeat it: Why should I not be selfish, as you men were when my father went to you for assistance?"

Lemuel Train smiled ironically. "Why, I reckon it's your trick, mister man," he said; "you've got all the cards."

"Come back here, men," said Hollis. "Since none of you care to answer my question I will answer it myself." He stood silent while the men filed back and resumed seats on the gallery edge. Darkness had come on while he had been talking to the men and inside the ranchhouse Mrs. Norton had lighted the kerosene lamp and its weak, flickering rays straggled out into the

darkness and upon Hollis's face and the faces of several of the men who sat on the edge of the gallery.

Hollis knew that he might readily become melodramatic in the few words that he purposed to say to the men, and so when he began talking he adopted a low, even tone, confidential, serious. He told them that the things he had written in his salutatory in the *Kicker*, months before, had been an honest declaration of the principles in which he believed. This was America, he repeated; they were all Americans; they were all entitled to that freedom of thought, speech, and movement for which their forefathers had fought. For one, he purposed to fight, if necessary, to retain his rights.

He told them that he held no ill-feeling against them on account of their refusal to assist his father. That was past history. But now they were to look into the future; they were all facing ruin if they did not combine in a common cause. So far as he was concerned their cattle might remain at the Rabbit-Ear until the drought ended, or until the stream went dry. And if Dunlavey fought them—well, he would be with them to the finish.

When he had concluded Lemuel Train stepped forward and shook his hand. The others fol-

lowed. There was no word spoken. The men filed down from the gallery, sought their horses, mounted, and rode slowly away into the darkness. When they had gone Hollis turned to resume his chair, but found Norton standing near him, looking at him with a curious smile.

“Shake!” said the latter. “I knowed you’d do it that way!”

CHAPTER XV

TO SUPPORT THE LAW

HOLLIS alone, of all the men whose cattle grazed on the Circle Bar side of the Rabbit-Ear, really doubted that Dunlavey would have the courage to inaugurate a war against the small owners. Lemuel Train was particularly strong in his belief that Dunlavey would not hesitate to shoot whatever cattle infringed on what he considered were his rights. "I know the skunk!" he declared heatedly to Hollis a day or two after the conversation on the porch at the Circle Bar. "He'll do it. I'm only scared that he won't wait till the tenth day before beginnin'. Why in hell don't it rain?"

This remained the great, universal interrogation. But at the end of a week it was unanswered. The sun swam in its endless circles, a great ball of molten silver at which no man could look with the naked eye, traveling its slow way through a blurred, white sky, sinking to the horizon in the evening and leaving a scorched, blasted,

gasping country behind. The nights brought no relief. Clark, of the Circle Y, sarcastically declared it to be his belief that some meddler in things firmamental was paying the owner of the sun to work it overtime.

Hollis's daily twenty mile ride from the Circle Bar to Dry Bottom and return became a trial to him. At night, when he returned from the trip, hot, dry, dusty, he would draw a chair out on the gallery floor and scan the sky for signs of rain. To his recollection since his adventure on the night of the storm there had not been a cloud in the sky. On the trails the dust was inches deep and light as a feather. It rose in stifling whirlwinds, filling the nostrils and the lungs, parching the tongues of man and beast and accentuating the suffering caused by lack of water.

All the pleasure had been drawn from Hollis's rides because of the dryness and heat. On a morning a week following the day upon which Dunlavey had issued his warning to the cattle owners, Hollis made his usual trip to Dry Bottom. Norton accompanied him, intending to make some purchases in town. They rode the ten miles without incident and Hollis left Norton at the door of the *Kicker* office, after telling the range boss to come back to the office when he had

made his purchases as he intended returning to the Circle Bar before noon. Hollis found Potter inside. The latter had remained in Dry Bottom over night and was busy at a type case when his chief entered. Hollis did not remain long in the office. He looked over some letters that Potter had placed on his desk, placed one in a pocket and rose, telling Potter that he would be back and instructing him to tell Norton to await his coming should the latter return before him. Then he went down to the court house.

He found the door of Judge Graney's court room slightly ajar and without knocking he pushed it open and entered. On the threshold he halted and drew a deep breath. Judge Graney was seated at the big table, and directly opposite him, leaning heavily on his elbows, his face inflamed with anger, sat Dunlavey. Near a window at the side of the room stood a grave faced man of medium height, slender and muscular, who was watching the Judge and Dunlavey soberly.

At Hollis's sudden appearance the Judge looked up and smiled, while Dunlavey faced around, a derisive, mocking grin on his face. Hollis bore no marks of the recent attack beyond the left wrist, still in splints.

"Come in," invited Judge Graney, his smile

growing, his eyes glinting oddly. "I think, since you are responsible for the startling innovation which we have been discussing, that you are entitled to a word."

He gravely waved Hollis to a chair and stood silent while the latter sank into it. Then he smiled, glancing furtively at Dunlavey and addressing Hollis.

"Perhaps you will remember that some time ago you printed an article in the *Kicker* urging upon the Government the necessity of bringing the law into Union County?"

Hollis nodded. "Yes," he said quietly; "I remember."

"Well," resumed the Judge, "the article has borne fruit. But perhaps not in the manner you expected." He laughed around at the three, deliberately closing an eye at Hollis. "You know," he resumed, addressing them all, his eyes twinkling as his gaze met Dunlavey's, "that the law is an expensive institution. It is a fundamental principle—at least of some governments," he smiled—"that a community that desires the law must pay, and pay dearly—for it. In short, if it wants the law it must pay taxes. I do not say that that is a principle which our government is applying, but I do say that it is an eminently fair proposition.

“At all events I have received word from the Interior Department that if we want the law to come out here we must pay for it. That is not said in so many words, but that is the inference, if we are to consider the instructions of the Secretary of the Interior—which are: ‘I am informed that several large ranch owners in Union County are inclined to evade taxation. Especially is this true—I am told—of a man named Dunlavey, who, if the report is correct, paid, during the last half year, taxes on five hundred head of cattle, whereas it is claimed that his holdings will amount to about five thousand, yearly average. In view of this ridiculously low return it seems incumbent upon me to appoint an inquisitor, whose duty——’”

Dunlavey laughed harshly, interrupting the Judge. Then he turned suddenly to Hollis, his face inflamed with passion.

“I reckon this is some of your work?” he snarled.

Hollis met his gaze steadily. “I imagine it is,” he said quietly. He could not keep a flash of triumph from his eyes. “Nothing could please me better than to discover that I had a hand in bringing the law to this country. It needs plenty of law.”

Judge Graney cleared his throat. “This

does not apply to you alone, Dunlavey," he said, facing the latter. "Letters have been sent to every cattleman in Union County, demanding their appearance before me. The government is determined to re-adjust conditions out here—to enforce this new law to the letter. Beginning on the first of next month,—September—which will be the day after to-morrow, every cattle owner in the county will be required to register his brand and return a list of his cattle, for taxation. Any owner refusing to make a fair return on his stock will make a grave mistake. Upon his failure to make such return the government will seize his stock and dispose of it to the highest bidder, deducting such an amount as will cover taxes, court costs, and fines, and returning the remainder, if any, to the owner." Judge Graney faced Hollis. "I suppose you have received your notification to that effect?" he inquired.

"I haven't paid much attention to my mail since—since I met Mr. Dunlavey and several of his friends one night—some weeks ago." He smiled grimly, at Dunlavey, who met his gaze with a derisive grin. "I haven't been very much interested in anything except getting well," continued Hollis. "But whether I have been notified or not I shall take pleasure in comply-

ing with the law. I shall have my list ready on time—likewise I shall register my brand.”

Dunlavey sneered. “That won’t be such an almighty big job—counting your steers,” he said.

Hollis laughed shortly. “Perhaps not as big a job as it would have been had conditions been different,” he observed dryly.

“Meaning?” snapped Dunlavey, stiffening in his chair.

“You may draw your own inference,” drawled Hollis.

For an instant it seemed that Dunlavey contemplated attacking Hollis; he placed both hands on the table before him, preparatory to rising, evidently thought better of the idea and sank into the chair again, his eyes flashing venomously as they met Hollis’s.

“This country’s going plum to hell!” he sneered; “when tenderfeet and half-baked lawyers get to running things it will be time for the cattlemen to pull up stakes and hit the breeze! But I’m telling you one thing!” He banged his fist heavily down upon the table in front of him and scowled at the Judge, his voice vibrating with passion: “You let your damned tenderfoot owners bring in their lists. Mebbe they don’t know any better. But I ain’t bringin’ in no list.

It's one thing to pass a law and another thing to enforce it!" He sat silent for an instant, glaring at the Judge, who smiled quietly at him, then he turned to Hollis.

"You've been carrying on like you was intending to own this here country some day," he sneered; "with your damned newspaper and your lawyer friend here. What we handed you the other night was just a sample of what you'll get if you don't hit the breeze out of this country!" He got to his feet and stood beside the table, glaring around at the three men.

For a moment neither of the three spoke. There was a saturnine, almost mocking, smile on the face of the man who stood at the window. In his expression one could discover much appreciation of the character of the man at whom he was looking—it revealed the fact that he had met such men before—and admired them little. There was no fear in the expression, yet had one of the other men taken the trouble to look at him they would have seen that his right hand was now lingering very close to the butt of the revolver at his hip.

Judge Graney cleared his throat. The smile was still on his face, but a sudden brightness of the eyes and a flush in each cheek showed that Dunlavey's defiance had affected him. Both he

and the man at the window watched closely as Hollis got to his feet and approached Dunlavey.

Hollis's face was slightly pale, but there was a steady, unwavering gleam in his eyes as he walked to within five feet of Dunlavey and stood quietly beside the table looking at him.

"Dunlavey," he began slowly, in a soft, even voice, in which there was not a hint of excitement, "I haven't anything to do with enforcing the law that seems to have come to Union County. You can defy the law if you please. But I have something to say in reply to what you have said to me. It is this: I haven't any ambition to own the entire country—such talk from a grown man is childish. But I do intend to own the little I've got in spite of you or anyone else. I am not in the least afraid of you. I owe you something on account of the other night and some day I am going to thrash you within an inch of your life!"

Dunlavey's hand fell suggestively to his side. "There's no time like the present," he sneered.

"Of course I know that you carry a gun," said Hollis still evenly, without excitement; "most of you folks out here don't seem to be able to get along without one—it seems to be the fashion. Also, I might add, every man that carries one seems to yearn to use it. But it has al-

ways seemed to me that a man who will use a gun without great provocation is a coward!" He smiled grimly into Dunlavey's face.

For an instant Dunlavey did not move. His eyes glittered malevolently as they bored into Hollis's. Then his expression changed until it was a mingling of contempt, incredulity, and mockery.

"So you're thinking of thrashing me?" he sniffed, backing away a little and eyeing Hollis critically. "You slugged me once and you're thinking to do it again. And you think that any man who uses a gun on another is a coward?" He laughed sardonically. "Well, all I've got to say to you is that you ain't got your eye-teeth cut yet." He deliberately turned his back on Hollis and the others and walked to the door. On the threshold he halted, looking back at them all with a sneering smile.

"You know where I live," he said to Judge Graney. "I ain't bringing in no list nor I ain't registering my brand. I don't allow no man to come monkeying around on my range and if you come out there, thinking to run off any of my stock, you're doing it at your own risk!" His gaze went from the Judge to Hollis and his smile grew malignant.

"I'm saying this to you," he said, "no man

ain't ever thrashed Bill Dunlavey yet and I ain't allowing that any man is ever going to. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

He slammed the door and was gone. Hollis turned from the door to see a dry smile on the face of the man at the window.

"Fire eater, ain't he?" observed the latter, as he caught Hollis's glance.

CHAPTER XVI

THE BEARER OF GOOD NEWS

HOLLIS smiled. The Judge got to his feet and approached the two men.

"Hollis," he said, "shake hands with Mr. Allen, of Lazette."

Allen's hand came out quickly and was grasped by Hollis's, both grips being hearty and warm.

"My name's Ben Allen," explained the stranger with a smile. "Tacking on a handle like 'Mister' would sure make me feel like a stranger to myself."

"We'll not quarrel about that," remarked the Judge with a smile; "we'll call you Ben." He looked soberly at Hollis, continuing:

"Allen has been sent over here from Lazette to assist us in establishing the law. He was formerly sheriff of Colfax County, having been defeated by the Cattlemen's Association because he refused to become a party to its schemes. On several occasions since severing his official connection with Colfax County he has acted in a

special capacity for the government. He is an old acquaintance of the new Secretary of the Interior and much trusted by him. He is to be the inquisitor mentioned in the letter which I read in the presence of Dunlavey."

Hollis looked at Allen with a new interest. After noting again the steady, serene eyes, narrowed always with a slight squint; the firm straight lips, the well set jaws, Hollis mentally decided that the Secretary of the Interior could not have made a better choice. Certainly, if he had served as sheriff of Colfax County, he had had some excellent experiences, for from reading the *Lazette Eagle*, Hollis had acquired considerable knowledge of the character of the inhabitants of Colfax. The editor of the *Eagle* had many times felicitated himself upon the fact that his town (Lazette) had not been built ten miles farther east—in which case he would have been a resident of Union—and ashamed of it.

"I think we need you," said Hollis simply. "But I imagine you will have to concentrate your efforts upon one ranch only—the Circle Cross. If you make Dunlavey bow to the law you may consider your work finished."

"I think Dunlavey will change his views of things shortly," remarked Allen, quietly, but significantly. He smiled at Hollis. "I have read

your paper regularly," he said. "You've got the editor of our paper hopping mad—with your claims about Dry Bottom being superior to *Lazette*. Also, you've stirred up the Secretary of the Interior some. I was called to Washington three weeks ago and invited to tell what I knew of conditions out here. I didn't exaggerate when I told the Secretary that hell was a more peaceful place for a law loving man to live in. Though," he added with a smile, "I wasn't ever in hell and couldn't be positive. I was just accepting what I've heard preachers say about it. The Secretary asked me if I knowed you and I told him that though I didn't I would be right glad to if you was doing anything in my line. He laughed and said he'd miss his guess if you wasn't making things interesting. Told me to get you to one side and tell you to go to it." He smiled dryly. "According to what I've read in the *Kicker* you don't need to be told that and so I'm keeping my mouth shut."

He dropped his humor and spoke seriously, questioning Hollis about the location of his ranch, listening quietly and attentively to the latter's answers. Half an hour later after having arranged with Judge Graney for the registering of his brand and the listing of his cattle, Hollis left the court house and went to his office. In run-

ning through his mail he came upon Judge Graney's notification and also another letter, post-marked "Chicago," which drew a pleased smile to his face. A few minutes later Norton came in, and though Hollis had done very little on the paper he rose and smilingly announced his intention of returning to the Circle Bar.

"We'll take the Coyote trail," he informed Norton, after they had mounted and were riding away from the *Kicker* office; "I'm stopping for a moment at the Hazelton cabin. Of course," he added, seeing a knowing grin on Norton's face, "I expected you would be suspicious—married folks have a habit of adopting a supercilious and all-wise attitude toward those of us who have been unfortunate enough to remain in a state of single blessedness."

"Meanin' that you're some sore because you ain't got hooked up yet?" grinned Norton.

"Perhaps," laughed Hollis. "But I have been thinking seriously of trying to reach your altitude."

"Girl willin'?" queried Norton, as they rode down through a little gully, then up to a stretch of plain that brought them to the Coyote trail.

"That's where I am all at sea," returned Hollis. He laughed. "I suppose you've read Ace's poem in the *Kicker*?" He caught Nor-

ton's nod and continued. "Well, Ace succeeded in crowding a whole lot of truth into that effort. Of course you remember the first couplet:

" ' Woman—she don't need no tooter,
Be she skule ma'am or biscut shooter.' "

he quoted.

"A woman seems to have an intuitive knowledge of man's mental processes. At least she guages him pretty well without letting him into the mystery of how she does it. A man can never tell where he will land. Ace came very near striking the nail on the head when he wrote in the second couplet that:

' She has most curyus ways about her,
Which leads a man to kinda dout her.'

"And then, knowing man so well, she absolutely refuses to let him know anything of her thoughts. Which again, Ace has noted in this manner:

' Though lookin' at her is sure a pleasure;
There ain't no way to get her measure.
I reckon she had man on the run
A long while before the world begun.'

"That seems to be the exact truth," he laughed.

Norton grinned at him. "You single guys have certa'nly got a whole lot to learn," he said, "for a fact. Of course if she's any kind of a woman at all she's got him runnin'. But which way?"

"Why, toward her, of course!" laughed Hollis.

Norton's smile widened. "You've tumbled to that, then," he observed dryly. "Then you're ready for the next lesson."

"And that?" questioned Hollis.

Norton smiled with ineffable pity. "Lordy!" he laughed; "you single guys don't know a thing not a durned thing!"

After that they rode on in silence. When they came in sight of the Hazelton cabin Norton reined in his pony and sat motionless in the saddle, grinning at Hollis.

"You run along now," he advised. "I'll be hittin' her off toward the Dry Bottom trail for the rest of the way—I sorta like that trail better anyway."

He urged his pony off at a tangent and Hollis continued on his way. He found Nellie alone, her brother having gone out on the range. She came out on the porch, hearing his pony's hoofs on the hard sand and rocks of the trail, and there was a sincere welcome in her eyes. It was the

first time that he had visited the cabin since he had returned to the Circle Bar.

"Oh!" she said delightedly. And then, aware of the sudden light that had come into Hollis's eyes at this evidence of interest, she blushed and looked down at the hem of her skirt, nervously pushing it out with the toe of her shoe.

During the days of Hollis's convalescence at the Hazelton cabin he had seen the young woman in many moods. In none of them, however, had she seemed so attractive as now. Confusion became her, he decided, and he regarded her with a new interest as he sat on his pony, awaiting her invitation to dismount. It came presently.

"It is frightfully hot," she said, moving over to where stood two chairs—one in which he had passed many hours during the days of his convalescence, the other in which she had sat quite often—near him. Not until now did he realize how full and satisfying those days had been. As he dismounted and tied his pony to one of the slender porch columns he smiled—thinking of Norton's question during their discussion of Ace's poem. "Of course"—the range boss had said—"if she's any kind of a woman at all she's got him runnin'. But which way?" Of course—literally—she did not have him running, but

he knew that some uncommon passion had gripped him and that he was unaccountably pleased.

His smile grew when he remembered her sudden indignation over his thoughtless statement that women had never interested him. Of course he would not tell her that he felt a serious interest in *one* woman. When he dropped into his favorite chair, removing his hat and mopping the perspiration from his forehead with his handkerchief, he caught her looking swiftly at the scar under his right eye—which would always be a reminder of his experience on the night of the storm. She saw his brows contract in a frown.

“You have quite recovered,” she said; “except for that slight scar under the eye you are the same as before the meeting with Dunlavey’s men.”

He looked beyond her at the tawny mountains that rose in the distance,—miles on the other side of the big basin—swimming in the shimmering blur of white sky—somber guardians of a mysterious world. What secret did they guard? What did they know of this world of eternal sunlight, of infinite distance? Did they know as much of the world upon which they frowned as he knew of the heart of the slender, motherly

girl whose eyes betrayed her each time he looked into them?

A smile that lurked deep within him did not show in his face—it was unborn and it gripped him strangely, creating a sensation in his breast that he could not analyze, but which pleaded to be expressed. He could not express it—now. He feared to trust himself and so he fought it down, assuring himself that it was not yet time. But he knew that he was not the same as before his experience with Dunlavey on the night of the storm. Something had stolen into his heart and was enthroned there; something deeper than a mere scar—a girl who had mothered him in his extremity; who had hovered over him, attending to his bruises, binding his wounds, tenderly smoothing his brow during the days and nights of the fever; attending his wants during convalescence; erecting a citadel in his heart which would stand as a monument to his gratitude. No, not gratitude merely. The smile was born. He turned and looked at her, meeting her eyes fairly, and hers dropped in confusion.

“Do you think that I am the same as before?” he asked suddenly.

She stood up, radiant, pointing a finger toward the Coyote trail. “Ed is coming!” she declared.

Before he could say another word she was down off the porch and running toward her brother, holding his horse while he dismounted, kissing him, patting him lovingly as they came toward the porch.

The latter greeted Hollis warmly. "A fellow couldn't help but feel good with a sister like that—now could he?" he inquired as he came upon the porch and took the chair which Nellie had vacated. She had disappeared into the cabin, not even looking at Hollis, but she could not have heard Hollis's reply had she remained. For it was wordless. There are times when men understand perfectly without speech.

Hollis stayed for dinner. Nellie was radiantly silent during the meal, attending to the wants of the two men, listening while they discussed recent happenings in the county. Ed was much pleased to hear of the coming of Ben Allen.

"That guy is business—through and through," he assured Hollis. "He was the best sheriff Colfax County ever had—and it's had some good ones. Allen's quiet, but there ain't anyone going to herdride him. Some have tried it, but they found it didn't pay and so they don't try it any more."

After dinner they went out on the porch for a

smoke, leaving Nellie inside. They could hear her singing as she washed the dishes. Hazelton smiled as a particularly happy note reached his ears. "I don't know what's got into Sis," he said, flashing a swift glance at Hollis. "I don't know as I ever heard her sing that well before."

Hollis made no reply and the conversation turned to the drought—as all conversations did during that period. Word had come to Hazelton of Dunlavey's warning to the cattle owners. He had heard also of Hollis's announced intention of taking sides with the small owners.

"Dunlavey's ten days is up the day after tomorrow," said Hazelton. "If Dunlavey starts anything what are you going to do?"

"That will depend on what Dunlavey starts," smiled Hollis.

"H'm!" inexpressively grunted Hazelton. He flashed a glance at the face of the young man beside him, noting the firm mouth, the steady eyes, and the faint, grim smile. "H'm!" he said again. "I suppose you know who you're going to give your water to?" he questioned.

Hollis nodded. "To men who refused to help my father when he needed help," he returned.

Hazelton smiled oddly. "I've heard about that," he said. He laughed. "It strikes me that I wouldn't give such men any water," he added.

Hollis turned and looked at him, meeting his gaze fairly, and holding it.

"Yes, you would, Hazelton," he said, a broad smile on his face.

"How do you know that?" queried the latter, slightly defiant.

Hollis motioned toward the kitchen door. "I know," he said; "you're her brother."

"Well," began Hazelton hesitatingly,—"I—"

The screen door opened—slammed, and Nellie Hazelton came out upon the porch. She had found time to change her morning dress for a soft, fluffy creation of some sort, and she stood before them, flushing slightly as both looked at her, a picture that smote Hollis's heart with a sudden longing. Only one glance did she give him and then she was over near Ed's chair, leaning over him, stroking his hair.

For a long time Hollis sat, watching them with sympathetic, appreciative eyes. Then he thought of the letter in his pocket, the one post-marked "Chicago," which he had discovered at the *Kicker* office on returning from the court

house. He drew it from his pocket and read the legend in the upper left hand corner:

“Dr. J. J. Hammond,
———Hospital,
Chicago, Ill.”

He studied the legend for some little time, his thoughts busy with the contents of the envelope. Fortunately, his letter to the great physician had fallen into the hands of the son, Tom Hammond, and the latter, not forgetting his old schoolmate, had appealed to his father. This was what the surgeon had written in the letter—he would not have agreed to accept the case had it not been for the fact that Hollis had been, and was Tom’s friend. He would be pleased if the patient would make the journey to Chicago within a month, that he might be able to take up his case before entering upon some scientific investigations which had been deferred a long time, etc.

Hollis had been reading the letter again. He finished it and looked up, to see Ed and Nellie watching him. He flushed and smiled, holding out the letter to Nellie.

“I beg your pardon,” he said. “I found this interesting. Perhaps you will also find it so.”

He leaned back with a smile and watched them. But he did not watch long. He saw

Nellie start, saw the color slowly recede from her face, saw her hands clench tightly—as she began to read the letter. He turned away, not caring to watch them during that sacred moment in which they would read the line of hope that the great surgeon had written. He looked—it seemed—for a long time down the Coyote trail, and when he finally turned his head toward them he saw Ed Hazelton sitting erect in his chair, apparently stunned by the news. But before him, close to him, so close that he felt her breath in his face—her eyes wide with delight, thankfulness—and perhaps something more—Nellie was kneeling.

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Hollis!” she said earnestly, her lips all a-quiver; “Thank you, and God bless you!”

He tried to sit erect; tried to open his lips to tell her that he had done only what any man would have done under the circumstances. But he moved not, nor did he speak, for her arms had gone around his shoulders, and her lips were suddenly pressed firmly and quickly to his. Then he was released and she turned, crying:

“Come and thank him, Ed!”

But Ed had taken himself off—perhaps he did not care to allow anyone to witness his joy.

Some time during the evening Hollis took his

departure from the Hazelton cabin. Ed had come back, silently taking Hollis's hand and gripping it earnestly. And before Hollis had departed Ed had taken himself into the house. Perhaps he divined that there were other's joys beside his.

That night before retiring Nellie stole softly into her brother's room and kissed him lightly on the forehead. That same night also Hollis rode up to the Circle Bar corral gate—singing. Norton and Potter were sitting on the gallery, waiting for him. While Hollis was removing the saddle from his pony Norton rose from his chair and smiled at Potter.

"Well," he said to the latter, "I'm goin' to bed." He moved a few steps toward the door and then turned and looked back at Potter, who had also risen. He laughed.

"Listen, Potter," he said. Then he quoted:

"Woman—she don't need no tooter
Be she skule ma'am or biscuit shooter."

He hesitated and looked again at Potter.

"Why," said the latter, puzzled, "that's from Ace's poem!"

"Sure," laughed Norton; "that's just what it is!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE RUSTLER

THE following day Hollis rode to town over the Dry Bottom trail. Had he followed a perfectly natural inclination he would have taken the Coyote, for it would have brought him to the Hazelton cabin. But he succeeded in forcing himself to go the other way, arguing that Nellie and her brother might wish to be alone to consider the great good fortune that had come upon them.

And so they did, though had Hollis appeared to them this morning as they sat upon the porch he would have been assured of a royal welcome. Indeed, during the early morning hours Nellie had cast many furtive, expectant glances down the Coyote trail. When eight o'clock came and Hollis did not appear she gave him up.

The dawn found her kneeling beside her brother's bed.

"Ed!" she said, leaning over him, waking

him, her eyes alight with joy; "Ed, he says you can be cured!"

He struggled and sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Gosh, sis!" he said in an awed voice. "Then it's true! I was afraid I'd been dreaming!"

"It is no dream," she returned ecstatically; "it is reality—beautiful reality! Wasn't it simply *great* of him to take such an interest in us?"

"Us?" grinned Ed, noting her crimson, happy face. "Well, mebbe he did it for *us*," he added subtly, "but I take it I've got a right to have another opinion on that."

She fled from him without answering and a little later he heard her singing as she prepared breakfast. After the meal Ed made a short trip out into the basin to look after his cattle and then returned to the cabin. Sitting on the porch he and Nellie devoted several hours to a grave discussion of the situation. They discovered that it had a serious side.

In the first place there was the dangerous nature of the operation. Here Ed laughed away his sister's fears by assuring her that he had an excellent constitution and that since the fall from the pony had not killed him he was in no danger from the knife. If Nellie entertained any doubt of this she wisely remained silent,

though Ed could see that she was not entirely reassured. He swept away her last objection to this forbidding feature when he told her that he preferred taking the risk to living in constant dread of a recurrence of an acute attack of his malady—such as he had experienced when he had attacked Hollis in Devil's Hollow.

There were many other things to be discussed—chiefly the care of the cattle and the cabin during his absence in Chicago. He would not listen to her suggestion to accompany him—he would prefer to have her remain at the cabin. Or he would try to arrange with Hollis for her to stay at the Circle Bar. There she would have Mrs. Norton for a companion, and she might ride each day to the cabin. He was certain that Hollis would arrange to have his men care for the cattle. He assured her that he would settle that question with Hollis when the latter passed the cabin that night on his return to the Circle Bar. Of course Hollis would take the Coyote trail to-night, he insinuated, grinning hugely at the blushes that reached her face.

But Hollis did not pass the cabin that night. He had taken the Dry Bottom trail on his return to the Circle Bar.

He had accomplished very little that day on account of the heat—and a certain vision that

had troubled him—taking his mind off his work and projecting it to a little cabin in a small basin, to a porch where sat a girl—the girl of his vision. She had voluntarily kissed him. Had it been all on account of gratitude? Of course—though— Well, memory of the kiss still lingered and he was willing to forgive her the slight lapse of modesty because he had been the recipient.

There had been one interesting development in Dry Bottom during the day. All day the town had swarmed with ranch owners who had come in to the court house to list their cattle for taxation and register their brands. Shortly after noon Ben Allen had dropped into the *Kicker* office with the news that every owner in the county with the exception of Dunlavey had responded to the law's demands.

To Hollis's inquiry regarding the course he would pursue in forcing Dunlavey to comply with the law, Allen remarked with a smile that there was "plenty of time." He had had much experience with men of the Dunlavey type.

Potter and Hollis exchanged few words during the ride to the Circle Bar. The heat—the eternal, scorching, blighting heat—still continued; the dust had become an almost unbearable irritation. During the trip to the ranch

the two men came upon an arroyo over which Hollis had passed many times. At a water hole where he had often watered his horse they came upon several dead steers stretched prone in the green slime. The water had disappeared; the spring that had provided it had dried and there was nothing to tell of it except a small stretch of damp earth, baking in the sun. The steers were gaunt, lanky creatures, their hides stretched tight as drum-heads over their ribs, their tongues lolling out, black and swollen, telling mutely of their long search for water and their suffering. Coyotes had been at work on them; here lay a heap of bare bones; there a skull glistened in the white sunlight.

A few miles farther on they came upon one of the punchers from the Circle Y with a calf thrown over the saddle in front of him. He was driving several gaunt, drooping cattle toward the Rabbit-Ear. The calf bellowed piteously at sight of Hollis and Potter. The puncher hailed them.

"You're Hollis, of the Circle Bar, ain't you?" he said when the latter had spurred his pony close to him. At Hollis's nod he grinned ironically. "Hot!" he said, coming quickly to the universal topic of conversation; "I reckon this wouldn't be called hot in some places—in hell, for in-

stance. Say," he said as he saw Hollis's lips straighten, "to-morrow the ten days is up. Mebbe it'll be hotter then. The damned skunk!"

Of course he referred to Dunlavey—the latter's threat to drive all foreign cattle from the Rabbit-Ear had been carried far and wide by riders—the whole country knew of it. There had been much condemnation and some speculation, but there was nothing to be done until after the tenth day. Even then much depended upon Hollis's attitude. Would he make war upon Dunlavey in defense of the men who had refused aid to his father in time of need?

Hollis was still of the opinion that Dunlavey would not attempt to carry out his threat. He smiled at the malevolent expression in the puncher's eyes.

"Somehow," he said quietly, "I have always been able to distinguish between empty boast and determination. Dunlavey has done some foolish things, no doubt, and is doing a foolish thing in defying the law, but I don't anticipate that he will do anything quite so rash as to further antagonize the small owners."

The puncher sat erect and laughed harshly. "You don't?" he inquired in an over-gentle, polite voice. "Mister Hollis," he added, as the

latter looked quickly at him, "you ain't heard nothin' from the Circle Bar to-day, I reckon?"

Hollis's answer was negative. The Circle Y man's face grew suddenly serious. "You ain't! Well, then, that's the reason you're talkin' so. The last I heard from the Circle Bar was that Norton an' some of your men had captured one of Dunlavey's men—Greasy—rebrandin' some Circle Bar steers an' was gettin' ready to string him up. I reckon mebbe you'd call that doin' somethin'!"

Hollis straightened. He had suddenly forgotten the heat, the dust, and the problem of water.

"How long ago did you hear this?" he demanded sharply.

"'Bout an hour ago," returned the Circle Y man. "I was rustlin' up these strays down in the basin an' headin' them toward the crick when I runs plum into a man from the Three Bar outfit. He was plum excited over it. Said they'd ketched Greasy down by the Narrows sometime after noon an'——"

But the Circle Y man finished to the empty air for Hollis's pony had leaped forward into a cloud of dust, running desperately.

The Circle Y man sat erect, startled. "Well, I'll be ——" he began, speaking to Potter. But

the printer was following his chief and was already out of hearing. "Now what do you suppose——" again began the Circle Y man, and then fell silent, suddenly smitten with the uselessness of speech. He yelled at his gaunt steers and shifted the calf in front of him to a more comfortable position. Then he proceeded on his way. But as he rode his lips curled, his eyes narrowed, and speech again returned to him. "Now why in hell would a man get so damned excited over hearin' that someone was goin' to string up a measly rustler?"

The interrogation remained unanswered. The Circle Y man continued on his way, watching the fast disappearing dust clouds on the Circle Bar trail.

When Hollis reached the Circle Bar ranch-house there was no one about. He rode up to the front gallery and dismounted, thinking that perhaps Norton would be in the house. But before he had crossed the gallery Mrs. Norton came to the door. She was pale and laboring under great excitement, but instantly divined Hollis's errand.

"They've taken him down to the cottonwood!" she told Hollis, pointing toward the grove in which Hollis had tried the six-shooter that Norton had given him the first day after his

arrival at the ranch. "They are going to hang him! Hurry!"

Hollis was back in the saddle in an instant and racing his pony down past the bunk house at break-neck speed. He urged the little animal across an intervening stretch of plain, up a slight rise, down into a shallow valley, and into the cottonwood, riding recklessly through the trees and urging the pony at a headlong pace through the underbrush—crashing it down, scaring the rattlers from their concealment, and startling the birds from their lofty retreats.

For ten minutes he rode as he had never ridden before. And then he came upon them. They stood at the base of a fir-balsam, whose gnarled limbs spread flatly outward—three Circle Bar men, a half dozen from the various outfits whose herds grazed his range, and the rustler—Greasy—a rope knotted about his neck, standing directly under one of the out-spreading limbs of the tree, his head bowed, but his face wearing a mocking, defiant grin. The rope had been thrown over the limb and several men were holding it, preparatory to drawing it taut. Norton was standing near, his face pale, his lips straight and grim with determination. Apparently Hollis had arrived just in time.

None of the men moved from their places

when Hollis dismounted, but all looked at him as though expecting him to express approval of what they were about to do. Several lowered their gaze with embarrassment when they saw that he did not approve.

"What is all this about, Norton?" he asked, speaking to the latter, who had stepped forward and now stood beside Greasy. Whatever excitement had resulted from the sudden discovery that his men had captured a rustler and were about to hang him, together with the strain of his hard ride to the cottonwood, had disappeared, and Hollis's voice was quiet as he addressed his range boss.

Norton smiled grimly. "We were roundin' up a few strays just the other side of the Narrows this morning, and Ace and Weary were workin' down the river. In that little stretch of gully just the other side of the Narrows they came upon this sneak brandin' two of our beeves through a piece of wet blanket. He'd already done it an' so we ketched him with the goods. It's the first time we've ever been able to lay a hand on one of Dunlavey's pluguglies, an' we was figgerin' on makin' an example of him."

Hollis met Norton's grim gaze and smiled. "I want to thank you—all of you, for guarding my interests so zealously," he said. "There is

no doubt that this man richly deserves hanging—that is, of course, according to your code of ethics. I understand that is the way things have been done heretofore. But I take it none of you want to make me appear ridiculous?”

“Sure not,” came several voices in chorus.

Hollis laughed. “But you took the surest way of making me appear so,” he returned.

He saw Norton’s face flush and he knew that the latter had already grasped the significance of his words. But the others, simpler of mind, reasoning by no involved process, looked at him, plainly puzzled. He would have to explain more fully to them. He did so. When he had shown them that in hanging the rustler he would be violating the principle that he had elected to defend, they stood before him abashed, thoroughly disarmed. All except Ace. The poet’s mind was still active.

“I reckon you might say you didn’t know nothin’ about us hangin’ him?” he suggested.

“So I might,” returned Hollis. “But people would not think so. And there is my conscience. It wouldn’t be such a weight upon it—the hanging of this man; I believe I would enjoy standing here and watching him stretch your rope. But I would not be able to reconcile the action with the principle for which I am fighting. I believe

none of you men would trust me very much if I advocated the law one day and broke it the next. The application of this principle would be much the same as if I stole a horse to-day and to-morrow had you arrested for stealing one."

"That's so," they chorused, and fell silent, regarding him with a new interest.

"But what are you goin' to do with the cuss?" queried one man.

"We have a sheriff in Dry Bottom, I expect?" questioned Hollis.

Grins appeared on the faces of several of the men; the prisoner's face lighted.

"Oh, yes," said one; "I reckon Bill Watkins is the sheriff all right."

"Then we'll take him to Bill Watkins," decided Hollis.

The grins on the faces of several of the men grew. Norton laughed.

"I reckon you ain't got acquainted with Bill yet, Hollis," he said. "Bill owes his place to Dunlavey. There has never been a rustler convicted by Watkins yet. I reckon there won't ever be any convicted—unless he's been caught stealin' Dunlavey's cattle. Bill's justice is a joke."

Hollis smiled grimly. He had learned that much from Judge Graney. He did not expect

to secure justice, but he wished to have something tangible upon which to work to force the law into the country. His duty in the matter consisted only in delivering the prisoner into the custody of the authorities, which in this case was the sheriff. The sheriff would be held responsible for him. He said this much to the men. There was no other lawful way.

He was not surprised that they agreed with him. They had had much experience in dealing with Dunlavey; they had never been successful with the old methods of warfare and they were quite willing to trust to Hollis's judgment.

"I reckon you're just about right," said one who had spoken before. "Stringin' this guy up would finish him all right. But that wouldn't settle the thing. What's needed is to get it fixed up for good an' all."

"Correct!" agreed Hollis; "you've got it exactly. We might hang a dozen men for stealing cattle and we could go on hanging them. We've got no right to hang anyone—we've got a law for that purpose. Then let us make the law act!"

The prisoner had stood in his place, watching the men around him, his face betraying varying emotions. When it had been finally agreed to take him to Dry Bottom and deliver him over to

the sheriff he grinned broadly. But he said nothing as they took the rope from around his neck, forced him to mount a horse and surrounding him, rode out of the cottonwood toward the Circle Bar ranchhouse.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TENTH DAY

DUSK had fallen by the time Greasy had been brought to the bunkhouse, and Mrs. Norton had lighted the kerosene lamps when Norton and Hollis, assured of the safety of the prisoner, left the bunkhouse and went into the house for supper. Potter had washed the dust of travel from him and when Norton and Hollis arrived he was seated on the porch, awaiting them. Mrs. Norton greeted them with a smile. Her eyes expressed gratitude as they met Hollis's.

"I am so glad you were in time," she said. "I told Neil not to do it, but he was determined and wouldn't listen to me."

"You might have tried 'bossing' him," suggested Hollis, remembering his range boss's words on the occasion of his first meeting with Norton's wife. He looked straight at Norton, his eyes narrowing quizzically. "You know you told me once that——"

"Mebbe I was stretchin' things a little when

I told you that," interrupted Norton, grinning shamelessly. "If a man told the truth all the time he'd have a hard time keepin' ahead of a woman."

" 'Woman—she don't need no tooter,' " quoted Hollis. "It has taken you a long time to discover what Ace has apparently known for years. And Ace is only a bachelor."

Norton's eyes lighted. "You're gettin' back at me for what I said to you the day before yesterday—when you stopped off at Hazelton's," he declared. "All the same you'll know more about women when you've had more experience with them. When I told you that I'd been 'bossed,' I didn't mean that I'd been bossed regular. No woman that knows just how much she can run a man ever lets him know that she's bossin' him. Mebbe she'll act like she's lettin' him have his own way. But she's bossin' him just the same. He sort of likes it, I reckon. At least it's only when a man gets real mad that he does a little bossin' on his own account. And then, like as not, he'll find that he's made a big mistake. Like I did to-day about hangin' Greasy, for instance."

Hollis bowed gravely to Mrs. Norton. "I think he ought to be forgiven, Mrs. Norton," he said. "Day before yesterday he presumed to

lecture me on the superiority of the married male over the unmarried one. And now he humbly admits to being bossed. What then becomes of his much talked of superiority? Shall I—free and unbossed—admit inferiority?”

Mrs. Norton smiled wisely as she moved around the table, arranging the dishes. “I couldn’t decide that,” she said, “until it is explained to me why so many men are apparently so eager to engage a boss.”

“I reckon that settles that argument!” gloated Norton.

Had this conversation taken place two months before Hollis might have answered, Why, indeed, were men so eager to engage a boss? Two months before he might have answered cynically, remembering the unhappiness of his parents. That he did not answer now showed that he was no longer cynical; that he had experienced a change of heart.

Of course Mrs. Norton knew this—Norton must have told her. He could appreciate the subtle mockery that had suggested the question, but he did not purpose to allow Norton to sit there and enjoy the confusion that was sure to overtake him did he attempt to continue the argument with Mrs. Norton. He was quite certain that Norton anticipated such an outcome.

"Perhaps Norton can answer that?" he suggested mildly.

"I ain't no good at guessin' riddles," jeered Norton. "But I reckon you know—if you wanted to tell."

But Hollis did not tell, and the conversation shifted to other subjects. After supper they went out upon the porch. A slight breeze had sprung up with the dusk, though the sky was still cloudless. At ten o'clock, when they retired, the breeze had increased in velocity, sighing mournfully through the trees in the vicinity of the ranchhouse, though there was no perceptible change in the atmosphere—it seemed that the wind was merely shifting the heat waves from one point to another.

"A good, decent rain would save lots of trouble to-morrow," said Norton as he and Hollis stood on the porch, taking a last look at the sky before going to bed.

"Do you really think Dunlavey will carry out his threat?" questioned Hollis. "Somehow I can't help but think that he was bluffing when he said it."

"He don't do much bluffin'," declared Norton. "At least he ain't done much up to now."

"But there is plenty of water in the Rabbit-

Ear," returned Hollis; "plenty for all the cattle that are here now."

Norton flashed a swift glance at him. "That's because you don't know this country," he said. "Four years ago we had a dry spell. Not so bad as this, but bad enough. The Rabbit-Ear held up good enough for two months. Then she went dry sudden. There wasn't water enough in her to fill a thimble. I reckon you ain't been watchin' her for the last day or so?"

Hollis admitted that he had not seen the river within that time. Norton laughed shortly.

"She's dry in spots now," he informed Hollis. "There ain't any water at all in the shallows. It's tricklin' through in some places, but mostly there's nothin' but water holes an' dried, baked mud. In two days more, if it don't rain, there won't be water enough for our own stock. Then what?"

"There will be water for every steer on the range as long as it lasts," declared Hollis grimly.

"After that we'll all take our medicine together."

"Good!" declared Norton. "That's what I expected of you. But I don't think it's goin' to work out that way. Weary was ridin' the Razor Back this mornin' and he says he saw Dunlavey an' Yuma and some more Circle Cross guys

nosin' around behind some brush on the other side of the creek. They all had rifles."

Hollis's face paled slightly. "Where are the other men—Train and the rest?" he inquired.

"Down on Razor Back," Norton informed him; "they sneaked down there after Weary told me about seein' Dunlavey on the other side. Likely they're scattered by now—keepin' an eye out for trouble."

"Well," decided Hollis, "there isn't any use of looking for it. It finds all of us soon enough. To-morrow is the tenth day and I am sure that if Dunlavey carries out his threat he won't start anything until to-morrow. Therefore I am going to bed." He laughed. "Call me if you hear any shooting. I may want to take a hand in it."

They parted—Hollis going to his room and Norton stepping down off the porch to take a turn down around the pasture to look after the horses.

Hollis was tired after his experiences of the day and soon dropped off to sleep. It seemed that he had been asleep only a few minutes, however, when he felt a hand shaking him, and a voice—Norton's voice.

"Hollis!" said the range boss. "Hollis! Wake up!"

Hollis sat erect, startled into perfect wakefulness. He could not see Norton's face in the dark, but he swung around and sat on the edge of the bed.

"What's up?" he demanded. "Have they started?"

He heard Norton laugh, and there was satisfaction in the laugh. "Started?" he repeated. "Well, I reckon something's started. Listen!"

Hollis listened. A soft patter on the roof, a gentle sighing of the wind, and a distant, low rumble reached his ears. He started up. "Why, it's raining!" he said.

Norton chuckled. "Rainin'!" he chirped joyously. "Well, I reckon it might be called that by someone who didn't know what rain is. But I'm tellin' you that it ain't rainin'—it's pourin'! It's a cloud-burst, that's what it is!"

Hollis did not answer. He ran to the window and stuck his head out. The rain came against his head and shoulders in stinging, vicious slants. There was little lightning, and what there was seemed distant, as though the storm covered a vast area. He could dimly see the pasture—the horses huddled in a corner under the shelter that had been erected for them; he could see the tops of the trees in the cottonwood grove—bending, twisting, leaning from the wind; the bunkhouse

door was open, a stream of light illuminating a space in which stood several of the cowboys. Some were attired as usual, others but scantily, but all were outside in the rain, singing, shouting, and pounding one another in an excess of joy. For half-an hour Hollis stood at the window, watching them, looking out at the storm. There was no break anywhere in the sky from horizon to horizon. Plainly there was to be plenty of rain. Convinced of this he drew a deep breath of satisfaction, humor moving him.

“I do hope Dunlavey and his men don’t get wet,” he said. He went to his trousers and drew forth his watch. He could not see the face of it and so he carried it to the window. The hands pointed to fifteen minutes after one. “It’s the tenth day,” he smiled. “Dunlavey might have saved himself considerable trouble in the future if he had placed a little trust in Providence—and not antagonized the small owners. I don’t think Providence has been looking out for my interests, but I wonder who will stand the better in the estimation of the people of this county—Dunlavey or me?”

He smiled again, sighed with satisfaction, and rolled into bed. For a long time he lay, listening to the patter of the rain on the roof, and then dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER XIX

HOW A RUSTLER ESCAPED

WHEN Hollis got out of bed at six o'clock that same morning he heard surprising sounds outside. Slipping on his clothes he went to the window and looked out. Men were yelling at one another, screeching delightful oaths, capering about hatless, coatless, in the rain that still came steadily down. The corral yard was a mire of sticky mud in which the horses reared and plunged in evident appreciation of the welcome change from dry heat to lifegiving moisture. Riderless horses stood about, no one caring about the saddles, several calves capered awkwardly in the pasture. Norton's dog—about which he had joked to Hollis during the latter's first ride to the Circle Bar—was yelping joyously and running madly from one man to another.

Norton himself stood down by the door of the bunkhouse, grinning with delight. Near him stood Lemuel Train, and several of the other

small ranchers whose stock had grazed for more than two weeks on the Circle Bar range without objection from Hollis. They saw him and motioned for him to come down, directing original oaths at him for sleeping so late on so "fine a morning."

He dressed hastily and went down. They all ate breakfast in the mess house, the cook being adjured to "spread it on for all he was worth"—which he did. Certainly no one left the mess house hungry. During the meal Lemuel Train made a speech on behalf of himself and the other owners who had enjoyed Hollis's hospitality, assuring him that they were "with him" from now on. Then they departed, each going his separate way to round up his cattle and drive them back to the home ranch.

The rain continued throughout the day and far into the night. The dried, gasping country absorbed water until it was sated and then began to shed it off into the arroyos, the gullies, the depressions, and the river beds. Every hollow overflowed with it; it seemed there could never be another drought.

Before dawn on the following day all the small ranchers had departed. Several of them, on their way to their home ranches, stopped off at the Circle Bar to shake hands with Hollis and

assure him of their appreciation. Lemuel Train did not forget to curse Dunlavey.

"We ain't likely to forget how he stood on the water proposition," he said.

After Train had departed Norton stood looking after him. Then he turned and looked at Hollis, his eyes narrowing quizzically. "You've got in right with that crowd," he said. "Durned if I don't believe you knowed all the time that it was goin' to rain before Dunlavey's tenth day was over!"

Hollis smiled oddly. "Perhaps," he returned; "there is no law, moral or otherwise, to prevent a man from looking a little ahead."

After breakfast Hollis gave orders to have Greasy prepared for travel, and an hour later he and the range boss, both armed with rifles, rode out of the corral yard with Greasy riding between them and took the Dry Bottom trail.

The earth had already dried; the trail was hard, level, and dustless, and traveling was a pleasure. But neither of the three spoke a word to one another during the entire trip to Dry Bottom. Greasy bestrode his horse loosely, carelessly defiant; Norton kept a watchful eye on him, and Hollis rode steadily, his gaze fixed thoughtfully on the trail.

At ten o'clock they rode into Dry Bottom

There were not many persons about, but those who were gave instant evidence of interest in the three by watching them closely as they rode down the street to the sheriff's office, dismounted, and disappeared inside.

The sheriff's office was in a little frame shanty not over sixteen feet square, crude and unfinished. There were a front and back door, two windows—one in the side facing the court house, the other in the front. For furniture there were a bench, two chairs, some shelves, a cast iron stove, a wooden box partly filled with saw-dust which was used as a cuspidor, and a rough wooden table which served as a desk. In a chair beside the desk sat a tall, lean-faced man, with a nose that suggested an eagle's beak, with its high, thin, arched bridge, little, narrowed, shifting eyes, and a hard mouth whose lips were partly concealed under a drooping, tobacco-stained mustache. He turned as the three men entered, leaning back in his chair, his legs a-sprawl, motioning them to the chairs and the bench. They filed in silently. Greasy dropped carelessly into one of the chairs, Norton took another near him, but Hollis remained standing.

"You are the sheriff, I suppose?" inquired the latter.

The official spat copiously into the wooden box

without removing his gaze from the three visitors.

"Yep," he returned shortly, his voice coming with a truculent snap. "You wantin' the sheriff?"

Hollis saw a swift, significant glance pass between him and Greasy and he smiled slightly.

"Yes," he returned quietly; "we want you. We are delivering this man into your custody."

"What's he done?" demanded the sheriff.

"I charge him with stealing two of my steers," returned Hollis. "Several of my men discovered him at work the day before yesterday and——"

"Hold on a minute now!" interrupted the sheriff. "Let's git this thing goin' accordin' to the law." He spat again into the wooden box, cocked his head sideways and surveyed Hollis with a glance in which there was much insolence and contempt. "Who might you be?" he questioned.

"My name is Hollis," returned the latter quietly, his eyes meeting the other's steadily. "I own the Circle Bar."

"H'm!" The sheriff crossed his legs and stuck his thumbs into the arm-holes of his vest, revealing a nickle-plated star on the lapel of the latter. "H'm. Your name's Hollis, an' you

own the Circle Bar. Seems I've heard of you." He squinted his eyes at Hollis. "You're Jim Hollis's boy, ain't you?" His eyes flashed with a sudden, contemptuous light. "Tenderfoot, ain't you? Come out here to try an' show folks how to run things?"

Hollis's face slowly paled. He saw Greasy grinning. "I suppose it makes little difference to you what I am or what I came out here for," he said quietly; "though, if I were to be required to give an opinion I should say that there is room for improvement in this county in the matter of applying its laws."

The sheriff laughed harshly. "You'll know more about this country after you've been here a while," he sneered.

"Mebbe he'll know more about how to run a law shebang, too," dryly observed Norton, "after he's watched Bill Watkins run her a little."

"I don't reckon anyone ast you to stick your gab in this here affair?" demanded the sheriff of Norton.

"No," returned Norton, drawling, "no one asked me. But while we're handin' out compliments we might as well all have a hand in it. It strikes me that when a man's runnin' a law shop he ought to run her."

"I reckon I'll run her without any help from you, Norton!" snapped the sheriff.

"Why, sure!" agreed the latter, his gaze level as his eyes met the sheriff's, his voice even and sarcastic. "But I'm tellin' you that this man's my friend an' if there's any more of them compliments goin' to be handed around I'm warnin' you that you want to hand them out soft an' gentle like. That's all. I reckon we c'n now proceed."

The sheriff's face bloated poisonously. He flashed a malignant glance at Hollis. "Well," he snapped, "what's the charge?"

"I have already told you," returned Hollis. "It is stealing cattle."

"How stealin' them?" demanded the Sheriff truculently.

"Changing the brand," Hollis informed him. He related how Ace and Weary had come upon the prisoner while the latter was engaged in changing his brand to the Circle Cross.

"They see him brandin'?" questioned the sheriff when Hollis had concluded.

Hollis told him that the two men had come upon Greasy after the brand had been applied, but that the cattle bore the Circle Bar ear-mark, and that Greasy had built a fire and that branding irons had been found in his possession—

which he had tried to hide when discovered by the Circle Bar men.

"Then your men didn't really see him doin' the brandin'?" questoined Watkins.

Hollis was forced to admit that they had not. Watkins smiled sarcastically.

"I reckon you're runnin' a little bit wild," he remarked. "Some of your stock has been re-branded an' you're chargin' a certain man with doin' it—only you didn't see him doin' it." He turned to Greasy. "What you got to say about this, Greasy?" he demanded.

Greasy grinned blandly at Hollis. "This guy's talkin' through his hat," he sneered. "I ain't allowin' that I branded any of his cattle."

Watkins smiled. "There don't seem to be nothin' to this case a-tall—not a-tall. There ain't nobody goin' to be took into custody by me for stealin' cattle unless they're ketched with the goods—an' that ain't been proved so far." He turned to Hollis. "You got anything more to say about it?" he demanded.

"Only this," returned Hollis slowly and evenly, "I have brought this man here. I charge him with stealing my cattle. To use your term—he was caught 'with the goods.' He is guilty. If you take him into custody and bring him to trial I shall have two witnesses there to

prove what I have already told you. If you do not take him into custody, it is perfectly plain that you are deliberately shielding him—that you are making a joke of the law.”

Watkins's face reddened angrily. “Mebbe I'm makin' a joke of it——” he began.

“Of course we can't force you to arrest this man,” resumed Hollis, interrupting Watkins. “Unfortunately the government has not yet awakened to the fact that such men as you are a public menace and danger. I did not expect you to arrest him—I tell you that frankly. I merely brought him here to see whether it were true that you were leagued with Dunlavey against the other ranchers in the country. You are, of course. Therefore, as we cannot secure justice by appealing to you we will be forced to adopt other means.”

The sheriff's right hand dropped to his gunholster. He sneered, his lips writhing. “Mebbe you mean——” he began.

“I ain't lettin' this here situation get beyond my control,” came Norton's voice, cold and even, as his six-shooter came out and was shoved menacingly forward. “Whatever he means, Watkins, he's my friend an' you ain't runnin' in no cold lead proposition on him.” He smiled mirthlessly.

Watkins's face paled; his right hand fell away from the pistol holster. There was a sound at the door; it swung suddenly open and Dunlavey's gigantic frame loomed massively in the opening.

"I'm looking for Greasy!" he announced in a soft, silky voice, looking around at the four men with a comprehending, appreciative smile. "I was expecting to find him here," he added as his gaze sought out the prisoner, "after I heard that he'd been nabbed by the Circle Bar men."

Norton smiled coldly. "He's here, Bill," he said evenly. "He's stayin' here till Mr. Hollis says it's time for him to go."

He did not move the weapon in his hand, but a certain glint in his eyes told Dunlavey that the pistol was not in his hand for mere show. The latter smiled knowingly.

"I'm not interfering with the law," he said mockingly. "And I certainly ain't bucking your game, Norton." He turned to Watkins, speaking with broad insinuation: "Of course you are putting a charge against Greasy, Watkins?" he said.

They all caught the sheriff's flush; all saw the guilty embarrassment in his eyes as he answered that he had not. Dunlavey turned to Hollis with a bland smile.

“Have you any objection to allowing Greasy to go now, Mr. Hollis?”

Hollis's smile was no less bland as his gaze met Dunlavey's. “Not the slightest objection, Mr. Dunlavey,” he returned. “I congratulate you upon the manner in which you have trained your servants!” He ignored Dunlavey and smiled at Norton. “Mr. Norton,” he said with polite mockery, “I feel certain that you agree with me that we have no wish to contaminate this temple of justice with our presence.”

He bowed with mock politeness as he strode to the door and stepped down into the street. Norton followed him, grinning, though he did not sheath his weapon until he also was in the street.

As they strode away from the door they turned to see Dunlavey looking out after them, his face wreathed in a broad smile.

“There is plenty of law in Union County, Mr. Hollis,” he said, “if you know how to handle it!”

CHAPTER XX

THE "KICKER'S" CANDIDATE

THE next issue of the *Kicker* contained many things of interest to its readers. Now that the drought had been broken, Union County could proceed with its business of raising cattle without fear of any future lack of water, with plenty of grass, and no losses except those from the usual causes. Dry Bottom merchants—depending upon the cattlemen for their trade—breathed easier and predicted a good year in spite of the drought. Their worries over, they had plenty of time—and inclination—to discuss the *Kicker*.

More advertisements were appearing in the paper. Dry Bottom merchants were beginning to realize that it deserved their support, and with few exceptions they openly began to voice their opinions that the editor would "make good." The advertisements began to take on a livelier tone and the *Lazette Eagle* grew more sarcastic.

When the *Kicker* appeared following the inci

dent in the sheriff's office, there was a detailed account of Dunlavey's now famous "ten day edict," together with some uncomplimentary comments upon the latter's action. This was signed by Hollis. He called attention to Dunlavey's selfishness, to the preparations that had been made by him to shoot down all the foreign cattle on the Rabbit-Ear. He made no reference to his part in the affair—to his decision to allow the small ranchers to water their cattle in the river at the imminent risk of losing his own. But though he did not mention this, the small owners and his friends took care that the matter received full publicity, with the result that Hollis was kept busy assuring his admirers that the incident had been much magnified—especially his part of it. Then his friends applauded his modesty.

In the same issue of the paper was also related the story of Greasy's capture by the Circle Bar men. But in telling this story Hollis was not so modest, for he spoke frankly of his part in it—how he had refused to allow his men to hang the thief, telling his readers that though Greasy deserved hanging, he did not purpose to violate the law while advocating it. Following the story of the capture was a detailed report of the incident in the sheriff's office and a scathing com-

mentary upon the subservience of the latter official to Dunlavey's will. The article was entitled: "Handling the Law," and Dunlavey's exact words when he stood in the door of the sheriff's office as Hollis and Norton departed were repeated.

Below this, under the rubric, "Union County Needs a New Sheriff," appeared an article that created a sensation. This dwelt upon the necessity of the county having a sheriff who would not permit his office to be prostituted by any man or influence. The *Kicker* named a man who would not be bribed or cowed and declared that his name would appear on the ballot at the next election—to be held on the first Monday in November. At the end of the article he printed the man's name—Ben Allen!

He had made this announcement without authority, and therefore he was not surprised, soon after the appearance of the issue containing the article, to see Allen's tall figure darken the door of the *Kicker* office while he sat at his desk.

"Durn your hide!" cried the latter as he stood in the doorway; "you're the biggest disturber in seven states!"

"Perhaps," smiled Hollis, motioning Allen to a chair. "Still, you don't need to thank me. You see, I have decided to clean up this county

and I need some help. I supposed you were interested. Of course you may refuse if you like."

"Refuse!" Allen's eyes flashed as he took Hollis's hand and wrung it heartily. "My boy," he declared earnestly, "you couldn't have done anything to suit me better. I'm just yearning to take a big hand in this game!"

"Interesting, isn't it?" smiled Hollis.

"Some," returned Allen. He grasped Hollis's hand and wrung it heartily. "You're a winner and I'm mighty glad to be able to work with you." He spoke seriously. "Do you think there's a chance for us to beat Dunlavey?"

Hollis laughed. "I flatter myself that a certain editor in this town stands rather well with the people of this county since a certain thing happened."

"You sure do!" grinned Allen. "Lordy! how this county has needed a man like you!"

Hollis smiled. "Then you won't object to being the *Kicker's* candidate?" he inquired.

"Object!" returned Allen with mock seriousness. "Say, young man, if you don't keep my name at the head of your editorial column from now till the first Monday in November I'll come down here and manhandle you!"

And so it was arranged. Dry Bottom gasped

in publis but rejoiced in secret. Many of the town's merchants personally congratulated Hollis.

But for two days following the appearance of the issue of the *Kicker* containing these sensations, Hollis stayed away from Dry Bottom. Now that he had launched Allen's campaign and placed the other matters before his readers, he began to devote some attention to the problem of arranging for Ed Hazelton's visit to the great Chicago surgeon. Both Nellie and Ed had been disappointed because of his continued absence, and when, on an afternoon a few days after his activity in Dry Bottom, he rode up to the Hazelton cabin his welcome was a cordial one.

"It seems like a year since I've seen you!" declared Hazelton as he came down from the porch to lead Hollis's pony into the shade at the rear of the cabin.

While he was gone with the pony Hollis stood looking up at Nellie, who had remained seated in her chair on the porch and who was now regarding him with eyes in which shone unconcealed pleasure.

"It hasn't really been so long, you know," said Hollis, smiling at her. "But then, I have been so busy that I may not have noticed it."

Of course she could not tell him how many

times she had sat on the porch during Ed's absences watching the Coyote trail. But she blushed and made room for him on the porch. Ed appeared presently and joined them there. The young man was not able to conceal his joy over the prospect of his ultimate recovery from the peculiar malady that afflicted him, and gratitude mingled with it as he looked at his benefactor. He had not recovered from an attack the day before.

"We've got it all arranged," he told Hollis with a wan smile. "I'm going to Chicago just as soon as I can get things fixed." He reddened with embarrassment as he continued: "There's some things that I'd like to talk to you about before I make up my mind when to start," he said; "I've been worrying about what to do with my stock while I'm gone. I wouldn't want it to stray or be run off by Dunlavey's gang." The appeal in his eyes did not escape Hollis's keen observation.

"I have thought of that too," smiled the latter. "In fact, I have talked it over with Norton. He tells me that he won't have any trouble in caring for your stock while you are away."

"Thanks." Hazelton did not trust himself to say more at that moment. He knew how great would be the task of caring for his stock

during his absence, and had not Hollis come to his aid with this offer he would have had to give up the proposed trip. He sat silent until his composure returned, and then he looked up at Hollis gratefully.

"That will make things much easier for Nellie," he said. And then, remembering that Hollis knew nothing of his intention to ask him for permission to allow Nellie to remain at the Circle Bar during his absence, he fell silent again.

"Easier?" inquired Hollis, puzzled. He had supposed that Nellie would accompany her brother to Chicago. He did not look at either of the two for a time. He had been anticipating a period of lonesomeness and this unexpected news came like a bright shaft of light into the darkness.

"But you can't allow her to stay at the cabin alone!" he said when Ed did not answer. And then the thought struck him that this peculiar silence on Ed's part could mean only one thing—that he and Nellie had decided that she was not to accompany him, and that the problem that was now confronting them—since he had told them that his men would care for the cattle—was the girl's welfare. He appreciated the situation and smiled wisely into the yawning

distance. But a deep sympathy made the smile grim.

“I have sometimes wondered how it were possible for a woman to live in this country without having close at hand one of her sex with whom to gossip,” he remarked, looking at Ed and deliberately closing an eye at him. “It doesn’t bother a man so much—this being alone. If he is a drinking man there are the saloons; if a poet he may write wise saws concerning the inconstancy of women; he may punch cows, another man’s head—or run a newspaper. In any case his mind is occupied.

“But a woman! Of course it is different with a woman. A woman must talk—she simply can’t help it. There’s Mrs. Norton. Only this morning I chanced to hear her remark to her lord and master that if he did not soon provide her with a companion with whom she might discuss the things which are dear to the feminine heart, he might as well make up his mind to requisition the mourners. All of which suggests the thought that perhaps it would not be a bad idea for Miss Hazelton to bundle up her things and advance on the Circle Bar. Thus two ends will be served—Mrs. Norton will secure her companion and Norton will find peace.” He turned to Nellie. “Of course if you are afraid that the

cabin will stray during your absence I could manage to ride the Coyote trail each morning and evening—or you could ride over yourself occasionally.”

He could tell by the light in her eyes that she was pleased over the suggestion. He was sure of it when she smiled at him.

“If you really think that Mrs. Norton would like some one to talk to——” she began, and then hesitated, her eyes suddenly widening as she saw an odd light in his. “Oh!” she said, “it isn’t true about Mrs. Norton wanting to talk. You have guessed that I—that Ed—wanted me to go——” But confusion descended upon her and she flushed crimson with embarrassment.

“If you think it isn’t true, why don’t you ride over to the Circle Bar and inquire?” he smiled.

“Perhaps I may,” she replied, looking at him in mock defiance.

As a precaution against the carrying out of this threat, Hollis that night acquainted Mrs. Norton with the facts in the case, even going so far as to inform the lady brazenly that he had deliberately lied about her. But when she had been fully informed, she told Hollis that she did not blame him very much, and that should Nellie carry out her threat to come to her upon an errand having as its object a question of his verac-

ity, she would assure the young lady that he had spoken the plain truth. Would that be sufficient?

Hollis told her that it would, and the following morning on his way to Dry Bottom, he took the Coyote trail and stopped off at the Hazelton cabin, where he informed Ed that he had decided to send Weary with him on his trip to Chicago.

Nellie spoke a few words to him while he lingered beside the porch, but her threat of the night before was not repeated and Hollis rightly guessed that it would never be carried out.

CHAPTER XXI

DUNLAVEY PLAYS A CARD

DURING the week following Ed Hazelton's departure for Chicago Hollis did not see much of Nellie. In the few days preceding his departure she had not allowed her brother to see how his refusal to allow her to accompany him had hurt her, but once he had boarded the east-bound express at Dry Bottom, she had yielded to the emotions that she had so far succeeded in concealing. Hollis had ridden in to town with them, and not until Nellie and he had seen Ed and Weary safely on the train—indeed, not until the train was well under way and the two figures on the back platform could no longer be discerned—did Nellie break down. Then Hollis turned to her with a smile to see the sudden tears well up into her eyes. He had not attempted to console her, feeling the awkwardness of the situation.

He was much relieved when she refused his offer to make the return trip with her, for he was certain that a few hours alone in which to

meditate over her loss would enable her to regain her composure. But before leaving her he secured her promise not to stop at the cabin, but to go on to the Circle Bar. On her arrival at the ranch she was to tell Norton to send one of the men to the cabin after the few personal effects that she had decided to transfer. But once out of Hollis's sight Nellie forgot her promise through fear over the safety of her things. She took the Coyote trail, riding slowly through the clear sunshine of the morning.

After taking leave of Nellie Hollis rode slowly down the street to the *Kicker* office. He looked in through the window and seeing that Potter had not yet arrived, continued down to the court house. He talked for a few minutes with Judge Graney. Nothing new had developed. Ben Allen had gone to visit several small ranchers the day before and had not returned.

Hollis returned to the *Kicker* office. At noon Potter had arrived, bearing the news that he had seen Nellie Hazelton on the Coyote trail, within a few miles of the Circle Bar. She had stopped at her cabin and there were several bundles strapped to the cantle of her saddle.

That night Hollis did not see her at all. He did not inquire for her, but surmised that she was in her room. The next morning soon after

he had awakened and while he still debated the question of arising, he heard her singing in the kitchen. He smiled, thinking how quickly she had adapted herself to her new surroundings.

At breakfast he looked closely at her several times, searching for evidence of her grief of yesterday. There was none. Therefore he was not surprised when, after breakfast, she told him that she intended riding with him as far as the cabin for the purpose of bringing the remainder of her effects. He gravely reminded her that she had broken her promise of yesterday, and that as a punishment he contemplated refusing her request. But when, an hour later, he urged his pony down the river trail she was riding beside him.

But she did not ride again that week. She did not tell Hollis the reason; that returning that evening she had reached the Razor-Back and was riding along its crest when she happened to glance across the Rabbit-Ear toward the Circle Cross. On the opposite side of the river she had seen two men, sitting quietly in their saddles, watching her. They were Dunlavey and Yuma. She did not know what their presence there meant, but the sight was disquieting and she feared to return to the cabin for the few things that were still here.

But as the days went her fears were dispersed. Time and the lure of her old home had revived her courage, and on a day about a week following her previous trip, she herself saddled and bridled her pony and set out over the Coyote trail toward her cabin.

She had not told Hollis of her intention to ride there, fearing that the knowledge of what she had seen on the day of the other ride would be revealed in her eyes. It was a good hour after noon when she stole out of the house to her pony, mounted, and rode away toward the river.

For many days she had been wondering at Dunlavey's continued inaction. He had been known as an energetic enemy, and though at their last meeting in Dry Bottom he had threatened her and her brother, he had so far made no hostile move. Usually he would go a considerable distance out of his way to speak to her. Perhaps, she thought, at their last meeting she had shown him that he was wasting his time. Yet she could not forget that day when she had seen Yuma and Dunlavey on the Circle Cross side of the Rabbit-Ear. The sight somehow had been significant and forbidding.

But when she reached her cabin she had forgotten Dunlavey and Yuma; her thoughts dwelt upon more pleasant people. Had she

done right in allowing Hollis to see that she was interested in him? Would he think less of her for revealing this interest? She could not answer these questions, but she could answer another—one that brought the blushes to her cheeks. Why had Hollis shown an interest in her? She had known this answer for a long time—when she had read Ace's poem to him while sitting on the porch beside him, to be perfectly accurate. She had pretended then to take offense when he had assured her that Ace had succeeded in getting much truth into his lines, especially into the first couplet, which ran:

“Woman—she don't need no tutor,
Be she school ma'am or biscuit shooter.”

The language had not been graceful, nor the diction, yet she knew that Ace had struck the mark fairly, for woman indeed needed no tutor to teach her to understand man—woman had always understood him.

She dismounted from her pony at the edge of the porch, hitching the animal to one of the slender porch columns. Then she went into the house to gather up the few things that still remained there.

But for a long time after entering the cabin

she sat on a chair in the kitchen, sobbing softly, for now that Ed had gone she felt the desolation of the country more than ever. Presently she rose and with a start looked out of the door. The dusk had fallen; darkness was stealing into the valley around the cabin!

Flitting here and there, she hurriedly began packing things which she took from shelves and racks. It was an engrossing task and she was much interested in it, so much so that she did not hear a slight sound at the door that led out to the front porch. But when she saw a shadow darken the doorway of the room in which she was working she stood suddenly erect and with rapidly beating heart stole softly forward and peered around the door-jamb. Of course it could be no one but Hollis. He had taken the Coyote trail to-night. He would be surprised to see her.

But it was she who was surprised. Yuma stood near the table in the center of the kitchen, looking straight at her, his insolent, evil face drawn into a foreboding smile.

After the first gasp of horror and surprise a righteous anger stiffened her.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Yuma's evil smile grew. She had seen him often, usually at a distance, for she had abhorred

him, with his olive skin, his thin, cruel lips and small glittering eyes. He had always seemed like an animal to her, though she could not have told why. She thought it must be something in his attitude, in the stoop which was almost a crouch, in the stealthy, cat-like manner in which he walked. She had spoken to Ed about him more than once, conveying to him her abhorrence of the man, and he had told her that he felt the same about him. She shuddered now, thinking of what her brother had told her of the man's cruelty. Dunlavey had often boasted that Yuma was the most venomous and bloodthirsty of his crew of cut-throats.

"What are you doing here?" she repeated, her anger growing.

Yuma laughed softly. "I saw you ridin' the Razor Back the other day," he said, showing his teeth as the words came—even, smooth, burdened with a subtle mockery. "I saw you again thees afternoon—but you not see me like the other day—I watch you thees long." He held up three fingers to denote that he had watched her three hours. She shuddered, suddenly realizing the significance of his attitude that day she had seen him from the Razor Back.

"Ed gone," he continued, watching her narrowly; "nobody here; I come. I like you—

much." He grinned, his eyes brightening. "I reckon you know—you girl that understan'?"

She drew a slow deep breath. Curiously enough, next to the horror and doubt that she felt over Yuma's presence at the cabin was a wonder for the idioms of cowboy speech that were interjected with his own. He had caught them from association, she supposed. She made a pretense of boldness, though she felt more like screaming.

"Leave this cabin!" she commanded sharply.

Yuma did not change his position. "Leave heem?" he laughed. "I theenk not. Dunlavey says me come here—make um love me—same as tenderfoot noospaper man!" He laughed again, exultantly. "Dunlavey say you spark tenderfoot—you spark me!"

She trembled, realizing that a crisis was at hand and that she must meet it boldly. She thought of the ivory-handled weapon in the holster at her hip and involuntarily her right hand dropped to its butt. She had learned to shoot, but she had never yet shot at a man and she drew her hand away from the butt of the weapon with a shudder. Yuma had been watching her closely, his evil little eyes glittering, and when he saw her hand drop away he laughed derisively.

"You no shoot heem!" he said. "You 'fraid.

Dunlavey say he reckon you no shoot—say you make love to um right away!”

He smiled significantly and took a step toward her. She made an involuntary step backward and her right hand again sought the butt of the revolver, the left closing on the edge of the door that opened into her room. Terror had given her courage and as Yuma continued to advance with a soft, cautious, cat-like sliding movement, she drew the revolver and presented it, though her hand wavered a little.

“If you take another step toward me, Yuma, I will kill you!” she declared.

She saw his little eyes glitter with decision, saw him measure the distance between them, saw him crouch for a spring.

She fired, aiming at the lower edge of the scarf that sagged at his throat. The smoke from the pistol blinded her; she heard his laugh, heard the rush of his feet as he hurled himself forward. Terror stricken over her failure to hit him, she dropped the pistol and whirled, grasping the edge of the door and slamming it shut in his face. She felt his weight against it, but he had been taken by surprise by the movement; there was the strength of desperation in her body and she held the door closed against him while she shoved the fastenings into place.

Then, suddenly overcome, she leaned weakly against the jamb, her heart thumping hard, her nerves tingling.

For a long time she did not move, and there came no sound from the other side of the door to tell her of Yuma's movements. There was a wild hope in her heart that he had gone, but presently, becoming a little calmer, she pressed her ear against the door. There was no doubt of Yuma's presence; she could hear him stepping softly about the room. Had there been a window in the room in which she had imprisoned herself she might have escaped, but unfortunately there was not.

She fell to thinking of the revolver she had dropped when Yuma had sprung upon her. It must have dropped very close to the door. Had Yuma picked it up? There was a chance that he had not. If the weapon were still there and she could open the door and secure it and close the door again, she would be in a position to defend herself. She could not defend herself without it. If Yuma should burst the door open she would be at his mercy. She must get the revolver.

Convinced of this she stood for some little time at the door, her ear pressed against it, listening for any sound that might tell her of the where-

abouts of Yuma in the cabin. She heard nothing. Perhaps he had gone? But she listened a while longer, determined to be certain before loosening the fastenings of the door. Silence—a premonitory silence—filled the room beyond the door. She could hear nothing except her own rapid breathing. Presently she heard a horse whinny. Was Yuma at the horses? It seemed incredible that any man should visit the cabin purposely to attack her. Perhaps Yuma had only intended to frighten her; he had said that Dunlavey had told him to follow her, but she believed that Dunlavey, in spite of his reputation for lawlessness and trickery, was not so unmanly as to incite the half-breed to attack her. He may have told him to steal the horses—she could believe that of him!

But for a long time, in spite of the quieting influence of these thoughts, she kept her ear pressed against the door. Then, moved by a sudden impulse—an accession of courage inspired by the continued silence—she cautiously loosened the fastenings and swung the door slowly open.

Her revolver lay close and with a swift movement she reached for it. As her fingers grasped its butt she heard a slight sound and Yuma was upon her from behind, pinning her arms to her

sides. She felt his breath on her neck, heard his laugh, exultant and derisive, mocking her. His right hand, gripping hers tightly, was slipping slowly down toward the hand that held the revolver. She struggled desperately, squirming and twisting in his grasp, silently matching her strength against his. Finding this hopeless and feeling his hand gradually slipping toward the revolver, she suddenly raised her hand toward her face, bringing Yuma's hand, still on her arm, with it. Then she dropped her head to his arm near the wrist, and sank her teeth savagely into the flesh.

Yuma howled in anguish, loosening his hold momentarily. In an instant she had wrenched herself free and had bounded to the center of the room, placing the kitchen table between herself and her assailant.

But he was after her with a bound, his little eyes gleaming with a venomous expression, his face contorted with passion. She raised the revolver and fired. For a breathless instant she thought that she had hit him, for he sank almost to the floor. But she saw that it was only a trick for he was up again on the instant, a mocking smile on his face and closer than ever. She fired again, and when she saw him sink to the floor she pulled the trigger a second time. He had been

very close to the table when she fired the last time and before she could press the trigger again he had lurched forward under it, raising it on his shoulders and sending it crashing down behind him as he confronted her, his evil face close to hers, his hands again gripping her arms.

She fought him silently, and together they reeled around the cabin. She bit him again, and then in an outburst of savage fury he brutally twisted the arm in which she still held the revolver, sending the weapon crashing to the floor. While twisting her arm he had been compelled to loosen his grasp of the other slightly, and she again wrenched herself free and darted toward the door leading to the porch. But he bounded forward, intercepting her, and with a last, despairing effort she raised both hands to his face and clawed furiously at his eyes.

She heard a savage curse from him, saw the lust of murder in his little, glittering eyes, felt his sinewy fingers at her throat. Then objects within the cabin swam in a dizzy, blurring circle before her. She heard a crash—seeming to come from a great distance; heard Yuma curse again. And then, borne resistlessly forward by the weight of his body, she tumbled to the floor in an inert heap.

CHAPTER XXII

PROOF OF GRATITUDE

SHORTLY after noon on the same day Hollis, finding work irksome, closed his desk with a bang, told Potter that he was going home, mounted his pony, and loped the animal out the Dry Bottom trail. He remembered hearing Norton tell one of the men that morning that he suspected that several of Ed Hazelton's cattle were still in the vicinity of the basin near the Hazelton cabin, and he determined to ride around that way and try to turn them back toward the Circle Bar. It would be recreation for him after a hot morning in the office.

He also remembered another thing that had occurred that morning at the ranch house. Mrs. Norton had assured him—with a sly, eloquent glance at him—that he might do worse than to make arrangements to keep Nellie Hazelton at the Circle Bar indefinitely. At the risk of being considered obtuse Hollis had ignored the hint, broad though it had been. But Mrs. Nor-

ton's words had shown him that Nellie stood high in her estimation and he felt a queer, unaccountable elation.

After striking the Dry Bottom trail he took a circuitous route and some time later came out upon a high ridge overlooking a basin. There were some cattle down there and he made a mental note of the locality so that he would be able to tell Norton where to have the men look for the cattle. Then he rode along the ridge until he could no longer see the basin. He spent most of the afternoon exploring the surrounding country, and then when the dusk began to fall he retraced his steps to the ridge upon which he had ridden earlier in the afternoon. Something familiar in the shape of the hills near him struck him and he halted his pony and smiled. These were the hills that he had seen many times from the Hazelton porch. He faced around, certain that if the hills could be seen from the porch he would be able to discern the porch from some point on the ridge, for he was satisfied that he must be nearly in line with it. He rode back and forth a few moments, and then, coming out on a bald spot on the ridge, he saw the cabin.

It was about a mile away, snuggled comfortably down in a little basin, with some trees and

shrubbery flanking it on both sides. He smiled as he looked at it, and then suddenly his face clouded, for he saw two ponies hitched to the porch. His forehead wrinkled perplexedly over this. He was certain that Nellie rode the same animal each time, because she would not trust any of the others that were now with the remuda. One of the horses belonged to her of course, for he could see the gay ribbon with which she was accustomed to decorate her animal's bridle. But to whom did the other horse belong? He gazed steadily toward the cabin, searching for signs of life on the porch. But though he could see clearly—even into the shadows from a rambling rose bush that clung to the eaves of the roof—no human figure appeared on the porch.

Certainly Nellie must have a visitor. But who? He was not aware that the Hazeltons had made friends with anyone in the neighborhood besides himself and the Nortons. He smiled. Probably some cowboy from the Circle Bar had been in the vicinity looking for Hazelton's cattle, had met Nellie, and had stopped at the cabin. He remembered to have heard Norton say that he was sending a man in that direction some time that day.

That must be the explanation. But while he sat, debating the propriety of riding down to the

cabin to satisfy his curiosity, the sound of a pistol shot floated to his ears on the slight breeze that was blowing toward him.

He sat erect, his face paling. Then he smiled again. He had been in the West long enough to become acquainted with the cowboy nature and he surmised that Nellie's visitor was very likely exhibiting his skill with the revolver. But he turned his pony and urged it down the sloping side of the ridge, riding slowly in the direction of the cabin.

After striking the bottom of the slope he rode out upon a broad level that stretched away for half a mile. He made better time here and had almost covered half the width of the plain when two more reports reached his ears. He was close enough now to hear them distinctly and it seemed to him that they sounded muffled. He halted the pony and sat stiffly in the saddle, his gaze on the cabin. Then he saw a thin stream of blue-white smoke issue from the doorway and curl lazily upward.

A grave doubt assailed him. No cowboy would be likely to exhibit his skill with a weapon in the cabin! Nellie's visitor must be an unwelcome one!

The pony felt the sudden spurs and raced like a whirlwind over the remaining stretch of plain.

Hollis had become suddenly imbued with a suspicion that brought an ashen pallor to his face and an awful rage into his heart. He slid his pony down one side of a steep arroyo, sent it scrambling up the other side, jumped it over some rocks that littered the rise, spurred savagely through a little basin, and reaching the edge of the porch, dismounted and bounded to the door.

He saw two figures—Nellie Hazelton and a man. He saw the man's fingers gripping the girl's throat and the lust of murder surged over and blinded him. In the dusk that had fallen he could only dimly see the man's head and he swung his right fist at it, putting every ounce of his strength into the blow. He felt the fist strike, realized that it had glanced, and tried to recover for a second blow.

But the terrific swing had carried him off his balance. He whirled clear around, slipped, and came down to the floor flat on his face. He was up in an instant, however, his brain afire with rage, his muscles tingling with eagerness. He did not think of the gun at his hip, for the lust of murder was in his soul and he wanted only to hit the man—to seize him and tear him apart—to crush and smash the vile hands that he had seen at the girl's throat.

Five feet from him, facing him, on his hands and knees and scrambling to rise, was the man. He recognized Yuma, and even as he bounded forward the latter gained his feet and tugged at his gun-holster. The weapon had not yet cleared the holster when Hollis was upon him. He struck again with his right fist and missed, crashing against Yuma in his eagerness and carrying him down to the floor with a force that shook the cabin. As they fell Hollis felt a sharp, agonizing pain in his left wrist, from which the splints had been only recently removed, and the hand hung limp at his side, entirely useless.

For an instant after the fall Yuma lay still, breathing heavily. Then he made a sudden movement with his right arm and Hollis caught a glint of metal. He threw himself at the arm, catching it with his right hand just above the wrist and jamming it tight to the floor. Yuma tried to squirm free, failed, and with a curse drove his left fist into the side of Hollis's face. Again he tried to squirm free and during the struggle that followed the hand holding the pistol was raised from the floor. Hollis saw it and wrenched desperately at the arm, twisting it and dragging it furiously downward to the floor. Yuma shrieked with rage and pain as the force of

the impact cracked his knuckles and sent the weapon clattering ten feet away.

For an instant both men lay silent, panting from their exertions. Then Yuma succeeded in getting one leg over Hollis's body and one arm around his neck. With a quick motion—successful because of Hollis's injured wrist—he turned the latter over on his back. His eyes alight with an exultant, malevolent fire, he gripped Hollis's throat with one hand and drove at his face with the other. A quick movement of the head served to defeat Yuma's aim and his fist thumped heavily against the floor, bringing a grimace of pain to his face. Disregarding his injured wrist, Hollis wrenched savagely and succeeded in rolling free of Yuma and reaching his feet. He had moved quickly, but the lithe, cat-like half-breed was before him, bounding toward the pistol on the floor. He was bending over it, his fingers gripping its butt, when Hollis, throwing himself forward bodily, crashed into him and hurled him heavily to the floor.

This time Yuma lay face downward, his arms outstretched, and Hollis lay sprawled out on top of him. But Yuma had succeeded in holding to the pistol; it was grasped in his outstretched right hand, just out of Hollis's reach.

For an instant again both men lay silent,

breathing rapidly. Then, yielding to the rage that still possessed him, Hollis bounded to his feet, striking Yuma a crashing blow in the face as he did so. While Yuma reeled he brought his booted foot down on the hand holding the pistol, grinding it under his heel.

Yuma screamed with pain and rage and got to his feet, holding his injured hand with the other. The pistol lay on the floor where Yuma had dropped it when Hollis's boot had come in contact with his hand. For an instant Yuma stood gripping his hand, his face hideous with passion. Then with a snarl of rage and hate he drew a knife from the folds of his shirt and sprang toward Hollis.

Hollis tensed himself for the clash, rapidly measuring the distance, and when Yuma came close enough caught him squarely on the side of the jaw with a vicious right swing. But in some manner when Hollis stepped aside to avoid Yuma's knife, his feet had become entangled with the legs of the table that Yuma had previously overturned. As he struck he slipped, the blow at Yuma's jaw not having the force he intended it to have. He caught himself, slipped again and went down, turning completely over the table top and falling face downward to the floor. He saw Yuma throw himself forward

and he tried to wriggle out of danger, but he failed. He felt the half-breed's weight on his body, saw the knife flash in the dull light. He tried to roll over and grasp the knife in its descent, but could not, his left arm, now useless, being pinned to the floor by Yuma's knee.

A revolver roared spitefully—once—twice. Yuma's knife hissed past Hollis's ear and struck the floor, its point sunk deep, its handle swaying idly back and forth. Yuma himself—inert, limp, rolled from Hollis's back and lay flat on his own, his eyes wide open and staring, two huge bullet holes in his forehead. And in the open doorway of the cabin stood Ten Spot.

For an instant Hollis could not realize his escape. He looked at Yuma and then again at Ten Spot. Slowly and painfully he got to his feet, looking around at the wreck of the room. Staggering a little, he walked to where Ten Spot stood, gripping the latter's hand silently, at a loss for words with which to thank him.

But apparently Ten Spot did not notice the omission, for he grinned broadly.

"I reckon there's folks which would call that a right clever bit of shootin'," he said, "seein' as there wasn't time to pull off no fancy stuff!"

CHAPTER XXIII

TEN SPOT USES HIS EYES

THE crash of Ten Spot's pistols aroused Nellie Hazelton, and she sat up and stared stupidly about—at Hollis, who was just rising from the floor; at Ten Spot, who still stood in the doorway; and then at Yuma's body, stretched out on the floor beside the overturned table. She shuddered and covered her face with her hands. The next instant Hollis was bending over her, helping her to her feet, leading her to the door and assuring her in a low, earnest voice that everything was all right, and that Yuma would never trouble her again, and that he wanted her to get on her pony and go to the Circle Bar. She allowed herself to be led out on the porch, but once there she looked at him with renewed spirit.

“It was you who came first,” she said; “I didn't see you, but I heard Yuma curse, felt something strike him, and then—I must have fainted. You see, I felt it must be you—I had been expecting you.”

As she spoke she seized his hands and pressed them tightly, her eyes eloquent with thankfulness. "Oh, I am so glad!" she whispered. Then she saw Ten Spot standing in the doorway and she ran over and seized his hands also, shaking them hysterically. And Ten Spot stood, red of face, grinning bashfully at her—like a big, awkward, embarrassed schoolboy.

"That's the first time I've ever been thanked for shootin' anybody!" he confided to Hollis, later. "An' it cert'nly did feel some strange!"

In spite of Hollis's remonstrances the girl insisted on returning to the interior of the cabin, to "bundle up her things." Feeling the futility of further objection, Hollis finally allowed her to enter. But while she was busy in one of the rooms he and Ten Spot carried Yuma's body outside, around to the rear of the cabin.

Then, when the girl had finally secured her "things" and they had been securely tied to her pony, and she had started down the trail toward the Circle Bar ranch, Hollis and Ten Spot returned to the rear of the cabin, took up Yuma's body, carried it to a secluded spot at some little distance from the cabin and there buried it deep and quickly.

"I want to thank you again," said Hollis as he and Ten Spot stood on the porch when Hollis

was ready to depart; "it was a great stroke of luck that brought you here just when you were needed."

Ten Spot grinned. "I don't think it was just luck that brought me," he said; "though mebbe it was luck that took me into the Fashion this morning. Whatever it was, I was in there, an' I heard Dunlavey an' Yuma cookin' this here deal. I wasn't feelin' entirely ongrateful for the way you'd treated me after you'd got my gun that day in the *Kicker* office an' I wasn't intendin' to let happen what Dunlavey wanted to happen. So I got out of the Fashion as soon as I could an' trailed Yuma. I've been after him all day, but somehow or other I lost him an' didn't find out where he'd gone till a little while ago—when I heard a gun go off. Then I hit the breeze here—after Yuma. That's all. That's how I come to get here so lucky." He stuck out a hand to Hollis. "Well, so-long," he said: "I'm hittin' the breeze out of the country." He stepped forward to his pony, but hesitated when he heard Hollis speak.

"Then you're not going back to the Circle Cross—to work for Dunlavey?" questioned the latter.

"Well, no," grinned Ten Spot. "You see, it might not be so pleasant now as it's been. I

reckon when Dunlavey hears this he won't be exactly tickled."

Hollis contemplated him gravely. "So you're going to leave the country?" he said slowly, his eyes twinkling. "I take it you are not afraid——"

"Don't!" said Ten Spot coldly and sharply. Then he grinned with feline cordiality. "I reckon I ain't scared of anyone," he said, "but I ain't likin' to go back to the Circle Cross after puttin' Yuma out of business. I've done some mean things in my time, but I ain't dealin' double with no man, an' I couldn't go back to the Circle Cross an' work for Dunlavey when I ain't sympathizin' with him none."

"I'm shy of good cowhands," offered Hollis quietly. "If forty a month would be——".

Ten Spot's right hand was suddenly gripping Hollis's. "You've hired a man, boss!" he said, his eyes alight with pleasure. "Ever since you clawed me that day in the *Kicker* office I've had a hankerin' to work for you. I was wonderin' if you'd ast me. There ain't no damn——"

"Then it's a bargain," laughed Hollis, interrupting. "You can start right now." He pointed to the ridge upon which he had been riding when he heard the shot that had brought him to the cabin. "Some of Ed Hazelton's cattle

are in the basin on the other side of that ridge," he said. "You go over there and keep an eye on them until I can get a chance to send some one here to help you drive them back up the river toward the Circle Bar." As he came to the edge of the porch to mount his pony his gaze fell on Yuma's horse, still hitched to one of the columns. "What are we going to do with Yuma's horse?" he questioned.

Ten Spot grinned. He walked over to the pony, unhitched it, and with a vicious slap on the flank sent it loping down the trail toward the river.

"That'll be my message to Dunlavey that Yuma ain't here any more," he said grimly.

Hollis mounted and rode a short distance, but halted and turned in the saddle when he heard Ten Spot call to him.

"Boss," he said with a grin, "I ain't exactly blind, an' mebbe you've got your eyes with you, too. But I saw that there Hazelton girl lookin' at you sorta——"

He saw a smile on Hollis's face, but the rest of his speech was drowned in a clatter of hoofs as the "boss's" pony tore down the Coyote trail. Then Ten Spot smiled, mounted his pony, and rode away toward the ridge.

CHAPTER XXIV

CAMPAIGN GUNS

OF course Yuma had been amply punished for his part in the attack on Nellie Hazelton, but there still remained Dunlavey—who had instigated it. Hollis was aware of the uselessness of bringing a charge against Dunlavey—he had not forgotten his experience with Bill Watkins when he had attempted to have Greasy brought to justice. He believed that he would not have brought such a charge had there been any probability of the sheriff taking action. He felt that in inciting Yuma to attack Nellie, Dunlavey had also contemplated a blow at him. The man's devilish ingenuity appalled him, but it also aroused a fierce anger in his heart that, in the absence of a powerful will, would have moved him to immediate vengeance.

But he contemplated no immediate action. Besides the attack on Nellie Hazelton there was another score to settle with Dunlavey, and when the time came for a final accounting he told himself that he would settle both. He knew there

would come such a time. From the beginning he had felt that he and the Circle Cross manager were marked by fate for a clash. He was eager for it, but content to wait until the appointed time. And he knew that the time was not far distant.

Therefore he remained silent regarding the incident, and except to Norton and his wife, Nellie Hazelton, Ten Spot, and himself, the disappearance of Yuma remained a mystery.

Dunlavey, perhaps, might have had his suspicions, but if so he communicated them to no one, and so as the days passed the mystery ceased to be discussed and Yuma was forgotten.

Hollis received a letter from Weary, dated "Chicago," announcing the safe arrival of himself and Ed Hazelton. "Town" suited him to a "T," he wrote. But Doctor Hammond would not operate at once—he wanted time to study the symptoms of Ed's malady. That was all. Hollis turned this letter over to Nellie, with another from Ed, addressed to her—whose contents remained a mystery to him.

Ben Allen had returned from his visit to the small ranchers in the vicinity, had confided to Hollis that he had "mixed a little politics with business," and then, after receiving a telegram from the Secretary of the Interior, had taken

himself off to Santa Fé to confer with the governor.

After several days he returned. He entered the *Kicker* office to greet Hollis, his face wreathed in smiles.

“You’ve got ’em all stirred up, my boy!” he declared, placing his hand on Hollis’s shoulder with a resounding “smack;” “they’re goin’ to enforce the little law we’ve got and they’ve passed some new ones. Here’s a few! First and foremost, cattle stealing is to be considered felony! Penalty, from one to twenty years! Next—free water! Being as the rivers in this Territory ain’t never been sold with what land the government sharks has disposed of, any cattleman’s got the right to water wherever he wants to. The governor told me that if it’s necessary he’ll send Uncle Sam’s blue coats anywhere in the Territory to enforce that! Third: after a man’s registered his brand he can’t change it unless he applies to the district judge. Them that ain’t registered their brand ain’t entitled to no protection. I reckon there’s trouble ahead for any man which monkeys with another man’s brand!

“Say!” Allen eyed Hollis whimsically; “that new governor’s all het up over you! Had a copy of the *Kicker* in front of him on his desk

when he was talkin' to me. Says you're a scrapper from the word go, an' that he'd back you up long as there was a blue coat anywhere in the Territory!"

Allen's speech was ungrammatical, but its message was one of good cheer and Hollis's eyes brightened. The Law was coming at last! He could not help but wonder what Dunlavey's feelings would be when he heard of it. For himself, he felt as any man must feel who, laboring at a seemingly impossible task, endless and thankless, sees in the distance the possible, the end, and the plaudits of his friends.

Yes, he could see the end, but the end was not yet. He looked gravely at Allen.

"Did you happen to hear when these laws become effective?" he inquired.

"On the first day of October!" returned Allen, triumphantly.

Hollis smiled. "And election day is the third of November," he said. "That gives Dunlavey, Watkins and Company a month's grace—in case you are elected sheriff."

Allen grinned. "They can't do a heap in a month," he said.

"No," returned Hollis, "but in most elections that have come under my observation, I have noticed that the winning candidate does not as-

sume office for a considerable time after the election. What is the custom out here?"

Allen grinned grimly. "Usually it's two weeks," he said, "but if I'm elected it will be the next day—if I have to go down to the sheriff's office and drag Bill Watkins out by the hair!"

"That belligerent spirit does you credit," dryly observed Hollis. "It will afford me great pleasure to participate in the festivities. But there is another matter to be thought of—which we seem to have overlooked. Usually before an election there is a primary, or a convention, is there not?"

"There is," grinned Allen. "It's to-night, and I'm ready for it!" His grin expanded to a wide, whimsical smile. "I told you that I'd been mixing a little politics with business," he said. "Well, I've done so." He got up and approached the front window of the office, sweeping a hand toward the street. "If you'll just get up and look out here," he said, "you'll see that I ain't lying. There's some good in being an ex-office-holder—you get experience enough to tell you how to run a campaign." He bowed to Hollis. "Now, if you'll look close at that gang which is mixing palaver in front of the Silver Dollar you'll mebbe notice that Lemuel Train is in it, an' Truxton, of the Diamond Dot,

Holcomb, of the Star, Yeager, of the Three Diamond, Clark, of the Circle Y, Henningson, of the Three Bar, Toban, of the T Down, an' some more which has come in for the racket tonight. Countin' 'em all—the punchers which have come in with the fellows I have named—there'll be about seventy-five.

“An', say!” he added, suddenly confronting Hollis and grasping him by the shoulder and shaking him playfully and admiringly, “there wouldn't a durn one of them have come over here on my account. They up an' told me so when I asked them. Said they'd nothin' ag'in me, but they wasn't considerin' votin' at all. But since Hollis wanted me—well, they'd come over just to show you that they appreciated what you'd done for them!”

Hollis smiled. He did not tell Allen that since the appearance of the *Kicker* containing the announcement that he was to be its candidate he had written every small rancher in the vicinity, requesting as a personal favor that they appear in Dry Bottom on the day of the primary; that these letters had been delivered by Ace, and that when the poet returned he had presented Hollis with a list containing the name of every rancher who had promised to come, and that several days before Hollis had known approxi-

mately how many votes Allen would receive at the primary. He did not intend that Allen should know this—or that he had been going quietly from one Dry Bottom merchant to another, appealing to them for their support. And the earnestness with which many of them had promised had convinced him that the primary was to be the beginning of the end for Bill Watkins and Dunlavey.

When he had first come to Dry Bottom it had been universally conceded by the town's citizens that his differences with Dunlavey and the Cattlemen's Association were purely personal, and there had been a disposition on the part of the citizens to let them fight it out between themselves. But of late there had come a change in that sentiment. The change had been gradual, beginning with the day when he had told the author of the notice that had appeared on the door of the *Kicker* office not to hold the express on his account. But the change had come and it was evident that it was to be permanent. It had only been necessary to arouse the government to the situation in order to secure intervention. He had hoped to secure this intervention without being forced to a hostile clash with the opposition, but his first meeting with Dunlavey had spoiled that. Subsequent events had widened the breach.

He was satisfied. Let Bill Watkins be defeated for sheriff and Dunlavey was beaten. But there was much to be done before that desirable end could be achieved.

Following the custom the primary was to be held in the sheriff's office. Watkins had issued a proclamation some weeks before; it had appeared on the door of the sheriff's office—a written notice, tacked to the door—but it had been removed the same day. Obviously, it was the sheriff's intention to conduct the primary as quietly as possible, hoping no doubt to disarm whatever opposition might develop. But Hollis had been apprised of the appearance of the proclamation and had quietly proceeded to plant the seed of opposition to Watkins in the minds of his friends.

He had been warned by Judge Graney that Watkins would try to "pack" the sheriff's office with his friends on the night of the primary. This had been the usual method employed by Dunlavey when opposition to Watkins developed. Drunken, dissolute, dangerous men were usually on hand to overawe the opposition; the Judge told of instances in which gunplay had developed. But Hollis had determined that Watkins must be beaten.

Allen did not stay long in the *Kicker* office. Nor, for that matter, did Hollis. Once, during

the morning, he went down to the court house to talk with Judge Graney. Then he returned to the *Kicker* office and worked until noon.

During the morning there had been a surprising influx of visitors. Bronzed punchers on dusty, drooping ponies rode down the town's one street, dropped from their saddles, and sought the saloons. Groups of them swarmed the streets and the stores. As Hollis walked down to his office after leaving the court house, he was kept busy nodding to friends—many of whom had become such during the later days of the drought. Merchants grinned at him from their doorways; Dunlavey's friends sneered as he passed or sent ribald jokes after him.

At noon he went to the Alhambra for lunch. Almost the first person he saw there was Dunlavey. The latter grinned at him mockingly.

"Friends of yours in town to-day," he said with a sneer. "Well, you'll need them!"

His voice had been loud enough for all in the restaurant to hear. Hollis did not answer, though he appreciated the significance of Dunlavey's words; they told him that the Circle Cross manager was aware of the contemplated contest and was ready for it.

During the afternoon Dry Bottom presented a decidedly different appearance from the day

when Hollis had first viewed it. Animation had succeeded desolation. Perhaps a hundred cow-ponies were hitched to the rails that paralleled the fronts of the saloons, the stores, and many of the private dwellings. It was apparent that many of the visitors had made the trip to town for the double purpose of voting and securing supplies, for mixed with the ponies were numerous wagons of various varieties, their owners loading them with boxes and crates. Men swarmed the sidewalks; the saloons buzzed.

Toward dusk the volume of noise in the saloons drowned all sound outside. Having made their purchases the ranchers who had driven in for supplies and had loaded their wagons preparatory to departure found time to join their friends and acquaintances over a convivial glass. By the time the kerosene lamps were lighted in the saloons revelry reigned. From one saloon issued the shrieking, discordant notes of a violin, accompanied by the scuffling of feet; from another came laughter and the clinking of glasses; from still another came harsh oaths and obscene shouts. In the latter place rose the laughter of women.

Seated at his desk near the front window of the *Kicker* office Hollis gravely watched the scene—listened to the sounds. In another chair

sat Potter. There was no light in the office; neither man had thought of a light. As the revelry in the saloons increased the printer glanced furtively at his chief.

"There'll be hell to-night!" he said.

"I expect there will be trouble," agreed Hollis.

Potter shifted uneasily in his chair, eyeing his employer with a worried expression. He was silent for a moment. Then he cleared his throat nervously.

"Do you intend to go there—to the sheriff's office—to-night?" he questioned.

Hollis looked quickly at him. "Of course!" he said with emphasis. "Why?" he interrogated.

"Nothing," returned Potter; "only——" he hesitated and then blurted out: "I wouldn't go if I were you. They've been saying that if you do there'll be trouble. You know what that means."

"Who has been saying that?" inquired Hollis.

"I heard it at noon—in the Silver Dollar. Some of Dunlavey's men sat near me and I heard them saying that Watkins was to win if they had to put two or three of his chief opponents out of business."

"I have been expecting that," returned Hol-

lis. He said nothing more and Potter, having done his duty, felt that he had no business to interfere further.

Shortly after dark there was a clatter of hoofs outside the *Kicker* office and four men dismounted from their ponies and strode to the office door. They were Norton, Ace, Lanky, and Bud. Evidently Hollis had been awaiting their coming, for he met them at the door, greeting them with the words: "We'll be going at once; it's about time."

Followed by Potter the five strode rapidly down the street. When they arrived at the sheriff's office there were a number of men congregated about the door. Inside a kerosene lamp flickered on a table that sat in the center of the room. Another lamp stood on Watkins's desk, and beside the desk sat Watkins himself.

Conversation died away as Hollis and his men approached the door and stood in the stream of light from the interior. A man stepped out of the shadow of the building and approached Hollis, drawing him and Norton aside. It was Allen. The latter had lost some of the sprightliness that had marked his manner during his conversation with Hollis in the *Kicker* office that morning—he was again the cool, deliberate, steady-eyed man he had been that day in Judge

Graney's office when Hollis had met him the first time.

"I've been waitin' for you," he said; "we're goin' to have a scrumptuous time. Dunlavey's planning to pack her." He swept a hand toward the interior of the office. "But each candidate is to be allowed two witnesses. I've selected you two. Dunlavey and Greasy are doing the honors for Watkins. We might just as well go inside; we can't do anything out here. There won't be anything done by any of this gang until Dunlavey says the word."

He turned and stepped into the sheriff's office, Hollis and Norton following.

Watkins looked up and surveyed them with a bland smile as they entered and dropped quietly into the several chairs that had been provided.

"I reckon she's goin' to be some hot tonight?" significantly remarked Watkins, addressing himself to Allen.

"Maybe," grinned Allen.

"We're goin' to take a hand in handlin' the Law," significantly remarked Norton.

Watkins's face reddened. He stared offensively at Hollis.

"I reckon you're a witness, too," he said, sneering. "Well," he went on as Hollis gravely nodded, "the law says that a witness to the count

must be a resident of the county. An' I reckon you ain't. You ain't been——"

"He stays," interrupted Allen, shortly. "That's settled."

Watkins's face bloated with a sudden anger, but he wheeled without replying and gave his attention to some papers lying on the desk in front of him.

For a long time the four sat in silence. Outside arose voices of men—growing in volume. There was a jam around the door; looking out Hollis could see the bronzed, grim faces of the punchers as they crowded close, moved by a spirit of curiosity. Hollis could hear exclamations of impatience, though the majority of the men outside stood in silence, waiting.

Plainly, nothing was to be done until the arrival of Dunlavey. And presently he came.

He had not been drinking; he was undeniably sober and self-possessed. As he entered the door of the office there was a sudden surge on the part of the crowd—several of the men tried to force their way in behind Dunlavey. But he halted on the threshold, scowling back at them and uttering the one word: "Wait!" The crowd fell back at the command and watched.

Dunlavey stepped across the room, standing beside Watkins, his rapid glance noting the pres-

ence of the three members of the opposition. He ignored Hollis and Norton, speaking to Allen.

"So you're sure enough going to run?" he said.

"Sure," returned Allen. He rose slowly, stepped deliberately across the room, closed the door, and stood with his back to it.

"We're all here now," he said quietly, "and I want to talk a little. There ain't no one going to hear what I've got to say but them I'm going to say it to. I reckon that goes?" He turned to Dunlavey.

Dunlavey had shown some evidence of surprise over Allen's action in closing the door, but this immediately gave way to a sneer of mockery. "I reckon you've forgot Greasy," he said.

"Why, I sure have!" returned Allen evenly. He opened the door a trifle and called: "Greasy!"

Evidently Greasy had been waiting at the door. for he immediately came in, slouching across the floor and standing beside Watkins and Dunlavey. Allen closed the door and adjusted the fastenings carefully. Then he turned again to Dunlavey.

"Now we'll proceed to do the talking," he said. He walked over to the chair that he had

previously vacated, dropping carelessly into it and leaning comfortably back. His movements had been those of a man unquestionably sure of peace. The expression of his eyes, the tones of his voice, his deliberation hinted at a desire for a peaceful compromise.

But once seated in his chair a startling change came over him. There was a rapid movement at his sides, a mere flash of light, and two heavy six-shooters appeared suddenly in his hands and lay there, unaimed, but forbiddingly ready. He sat erect, his eyes chilled and glittering, alert, filled with menace.

"Now," he said sharply, "the first man who peeps above a whisper gets his so plenty that he won't care a damn who's nominated for sheriff!" He spoke to Norton and Hollis without turning his head. "You two get whatever guns them gentlemen happen to have on them, standing to one side so's I can see to perforate anyone who ain't agreeable to handing them over."

Norton rose and approached Dunlavey, while Hollis stepped forward to the sheriff and secured the weapon that reposed in a holster at his right hip. He did likewise with Greasy. While Norton was relieving Dunlavey of his weapon the sheriff opened his lips to speak, his gaze fixed doubtfully on one of Allen's sixes.

"The law——" he began. But Allen interrupted with a grin.

"Sure," he said, "the law didn't figure on this. But I reckon you heard Big Bill say once that the law could be handled. I'm handling it now. But I reckon that lets you out—you ain't in on this and the mourners'll be after you to-morrow if you open your trap again!"

The sheriff swelled with rage, but he closed his lips tightly. When Hollis and Norton had completed their search for weapons and had laid the result of their search on the table near Allen they sought their chairs.

Dunlavey had said nothing. He stood beside Watkins's desk, still self-possessed, the mocking smile still on his face, though into his eyes had come a doubting, worried expression. Plainly he had not anticipated such drastic action from Allen.

The latter laughed grimly, quietly. "Sort of unexpected, wasn't it, Bill?" he said, addressing Dunlavey. "It ain't just the sort of politics that you've been used to. But I'm kind of used to it myself. Had to pull the same game off over in Colfax County when I was runnin' for sheriff the first time. It worked, too, because the folks that was mixed up in it knowed I wasn't ringing in any bluff." He looked at Dunlavey

with a level, steady gaze, his eyes gleaming coldly. "If you think I'm bluffing now, chirp for some one of your pluguglies to bust into this game. I'd sort of like to let off my campaign guns into your dirty gizzard!"

Hollis had been watching Dunlavey closely. There was no fear in the man's eyes; even the doubt and worry that had been there had disappeared and his expression was now mildly ironical, contrasting oddly with the demeanor of Watkins—who was plainly frightened—and that of Greasy—who smirked and showed his teeth like some beast at bay and in fear of death. It was evident that Dunlavey possessed the spirit of the fighter, that indomitable courage which enables a man to face any situation and still retain his presence of mind, which permits him to face death unafraid and unyielding. In spite of the enmity that had existed between them from the beginning, Hollis had always respected Dunlavey for these very qualities, and within the last few minutes that respect had grown.

Dunlavey's eyes gleamed as he looked at Allen. "I don't think you would try to work any bluff on me, Allen," he said quietly. "You've took me by surprise, that's a fact. But let's get down to business. What's your game?"

"I reckon that's a sensible way to look at it,"

returned Allen evenly. "That's the way I expected you'd look at it when you begun to realize that I was holding some pretty good cards. There ain't nothing personal in this; I'm out for a square deal and I'm going to get it. I want you to understand that I'm running this game to-night and I'm running it square. If I get enough votes I'm going to be the next sheriff. If I don't get enough votes Bill Watkins'll be it. But the votes are going to be real votes. I ain't figuring on letting your gang pack in here and keep my friends from voting.

"I'm going to put your hat on this table. Then Norton will open the door and let one man come in. That man will vote—for whoever he pleases. Then Mr. Hollis will let him out the back door and Norton will let another man in the front. There won't be any row. I'm telling you that you and Bill Watkins and Greasy are going to set here and watch the voting. I'm going to stand behind you with one of my guns tucked under your fifth rib. If you, or Watkins, or Greasy let out a yawp that can be construed as a signal for anyone to bust into the game, or if there's anything started by your friends which ain't your doing, I'm going to pump six chunks of lead into you so fast that they'll be playing tag with one another going

through. I reckon you get me. That ends the palaver."

He arose, snatched Dunlavey's hat from his head, placed it on the table, and walked behind Dunlavey, standing against the wall.

"Open the door!" he directed, looking at Norton.

CHAPTER XXV

HANDLING THE LAW*

NORTON opened the door a trifle and called "One man at a time!" There were some hoarse shouts from without—presumably from Dunlavey's friends; a chorus of derisive laughter from Allen's. Then the first man entered.

It was Ace. The poet stood for an instant, blinking at the light, then he grinned as his gaze rested on the occupants of the room. He was directed how to cast his ballot. He took the piece of paper that was given him by Norton, scrawled "Allen" across it with a pencil that Norton had previously placed on the table, and dropped the paper into Dunlavey's hat. Hollis opened the rear door for him, but he halted on the threshold, looking back into the room with a broad grin.

"Gawd A'mighty!" he said in an awed tone; "there must have been a wad of money blowed in in this here town to-day! Drunks! Man alive

there ain't nothin' but drunks; the town's reelin' with 'em! They're layin' in the street; there's a dozen in the Silver Dollar an' that many more in the Fashion—an' Gawd knows how many more in the other saloons. Their heads is under the tables; they're hangin' on the walls an' clawin' around in spittoons—gle-or-i-ously, be-ut-i-fully paralyzed!"

He was suddenly outside, pushed through the door by Hollis, and the door closed after him. Hollis glanced furtively at Dunlavey to see that gentleman scowl. He thought he saw a questioning glint in Allen's eyes as the latter looked suddenly at him, but he merely smiled and gave his attention to the next man, who was now entering.

The latter proved to be Lemuel Train. He did his voting quietly and grimly. But as he went out through the door that Hollis opened for him he growled: "Lordy, what a drunken bunch!" He looked at Hollis. "One of your men, too," he said, grinning slightly. "I thought you taught them better!"

Hollis frowned. He knew that Allen would need all his friends; none of them could be spared in this crisis. He smiled incredulously. It had been only a short time before that his men had accompanied him to the door of the sheriff's

office. At that time they were perfectly sober. It would have been impossible for any of them—

“An’ Ten Spot’s a hummer when he gits started,” Train was saying. “I’ve seen him before when he cut loose an’ he sure is a holy terror!”

Then with a word of parting Train was gone, saying that he had done all the “damage” he could and that he purposed “hitting” the trail back to his ranch.

He had certainly done some damage to Hollis. The latter’s mind now rioted with all sorts of conjecture and he mechanically did his work of letting man after man out through the rear door, scarcely seeing them.

He was aware of an odd expression that had come into Dunlavey’s eyes at the mention of Ten Spot. Had Dunlavey succeeded in bribing Ten Spot to desert him? He had left Ten Spot at the Circle Bar, not inviting him to Dry Bottom because he felt that the latter would rather not come since he had deserted Dunlavey. And Ten Spot had come to town anyway. What did it mean? Did it mean that Ten Spot had come to assist Dunlavey in nominating Watkins and defeating his new employer?

He frowned again, and for the next few minutes gravely studied Dunlavey’s face. He was

sure that the latter's manner had changed. The mocking smile which had been on his face since his arrival at the sheriff's office had been superseded by a huge grin—plainly of anticipation. Ten Spot—dangerous, reckless, drunk, at the head of a number of dissolute men, had it in his power to make things decidedly interesting should he advance on the sheriff's office with the intention of assisting Dunlavey.

Several times since hiring Ten Spot Hollis had doubted him. The suspicion had assailed him that perhaps the appearance of Ten Spot at the Hazelton cabin so opportunely had been a part of a plot by Dunlavey to place a spy in his employ. They might have purposely sacrificed Yuma.

During the next quarter of an hour he gave more attention to Dunlavey than to the steady stream of men that passed through the room, though he recognized a goodly number as friends he had made during the latter days of the drought.

Allen's spirits had risen during the last quarter of an hour. His maneuver had dissipated Dunlavey's strength and it was plain to be seen that a majority of the votes cast were for him. If nothing unusual or unexpected happened within the next hour, or until nine o'clock, the hour

named in Watkins's proclamation for the closing of the polls, he was assured of victory.

Thoughts of the same character were passing through Hollis's mind. There was silence in the office. A man was voting at the table—writing his favorite's name on a piece of paper. Hollis consulted his watch. It lacked over an hour of the time for closing. The man at the table finished writing and tossed the paper into the hat. Hollis opened the rear door to allow him to go out. While the door remained open a sound floated in, which they all heard—an ear-splitting screech, followed instantly by a chorus of yells, a pistol report, more yells, and then a number of reports.

Norton did not open the door. He exchanged glances with Hollis and Allen. Dunlavey grinned widely.

"Something's coming," remarked Allen grimly.

Dunlavey's grin grew derisive. "It would sure be too bad if my friends should bust up this peace meeting," he sneered.

"There won't be nothin' spoiled," grimly assured Allen. But he drew his other six-shooter.

The sounds outside grew in volume as they swept toward the sheriff's office. They broke presently at the door and an ominous silence suc-

ceeded. Then a voice reached the interior—harsh authoritative—Ten Spot's voice.

“Open up, you damned shorthorns!” it said.

Norton looked at Allen. The latter's face was pale. “They come in,” he directed, “like the others—one at a time.”

Norton carefully withdrew the bar with which the door was fastened, swinging it open slightly. As he did so there was a sudden rush of bodies; Norton tried to jam the door shut, failed, and was flung back several steps by the surging, yelling crowd that piled tumultuously into the room.

There were perhaps twenty of them and as they surged into the room, shouting and cursing and laughing Hollis recognized among them many men that he had come to know by sight. They were of the reckless, lawless element upon which Dunlavey had relied for his support—men of Ten Spot's character. They had been drinking, but in spite of their laughter and loud talking it was plain to be seen that they had determined not to be balked in the purpose which had brought them into the office.

There was now no need to guard the door; the damage had been wrought, and Norton backed away, leaving the door ajar, pale, grim eyed, alert, ready to take an active part in the trouble which he felt certain was sure to develop. Some-

thing in the faces of the men who had come in with Ten Spot proclaimed trouble.

Allen had not moved. He still stood behind Dunlavey, but his weapons no longer menaced the Circle Cross manager; their muzzles, level and forbidding, were covering the other men.

Standing quietly beside the rear door, his face pale, his eyes bright, his lips in straight lines, Hollis watched closely as the visitors, having gained entrance, gathered together in the center of the room. They were not awed by Allen's weapons; they grinned hugely at him. One man, a young man of about Hollis's age, bronzed, lean, reckless of eye, and unmistakably under the influence of liquor, lunged forward to Allen and stood within arm's length of him, grinning at him.

"Two guns!" he said with a laugh. "Why, I reckon you'd make a hell of a sheriff!"

A chorus of laughter greeted the young cowboy's words. Dunlavey grinned widely. "You boys are just in time," he said.

There was another roar of laughter. Many of the men seemed only now to have become aware of Dunlavey's presence and they surged forward around him, disregarding Allen's guns. The latter seemed to realize that the situation had passed beyond his control, for catching Hol-

lis's eye he smiled grimly and sheathed his weapons, seeking Hollis's side.

"It's no use," he said shortly to Hollis as he came near; "they'll run things to suit themselves now. I wasn't expectin' Ten Spot to butt into the game."

"I reckon they've got us." Norton had also sought Hollis's side and the three stood near the rear door, watching the crowd around Dunlavey. Hollis tried to catch Ten Spot's gaze but failed—the latter seemed studiously to avoid him.

A wave of dull anger surged through Hollis's veins. Until now the contest had been conducted fairly; they had given Dunlavey and Watkins an honest election, even though they had found it necessary to eliminate them as active participants. From now on he was assured the contest would be a joke—though a grim one. He had depended upon Allen's success—it meant much to him. The thought of failure just when victory was within his grasp aroused him and in spite of Norton's low word of caution he stepped forward and stood beside the table on which reposed the hat into which the ballots had been placed by the men who had previously voted. He intended to take personal charge of the hat, determined upon securing a fair deal in spite of the great odds.

As he stepped forward he saw Greasy grin maliciously and try to snatch a gun from the holster of a cowboy who stood near him. This attempt was frustrated by the puncher, who suddenly dropped his hand to his holster, where it closed upon Greasy's. The puncher snarled, muttered profanely, and struck furiously at Greasy, knocking him down in a corner.

Other men moved. There were curses; the flashing of metal as guns came out. Hollis felt rather than saw Norton and Allen advance toward the table and stand beside him. A grim smile wreathed his face over the knowledge that in the crowd there were at least two men upon whom he might depend to the end—whatever the end might be.

He heard Dunlavey snarl an oath, saw his big form loom out of the crowd, saw one of his gigantic hands reach for the hat on the table.

"I reckon I'll take charge of this now!" he sneered, his brutal face close to Hollis's.

Hollis would have struck the face that was so close to his, but at the instant he saw Dunlavey's hand reach out for the hat he saw another hand dart out from the other side of the table, seize the hat, and draw it out of Dunlavey's reach.

"I don't reckon that you'll take charge of her!" said a voice.

Hollis turned quickly. Over the table leaned Ten Spot, the captured hat in his hand, a big forty-five in the other, a cold, evil glitter in his eyes as he looked up at Dunlavey.

"I don't reckon that you're goin' to have a hand in runnin' this show a-tall, Bill," he sneered. "Me an' my friends come down here special to tend to that." He grinned the shallow, hard grin that marks the passing of a friendship and the dawn of a bitter hatred. "You see, Bill, me an' my friends has got sorta tired of the way you've been runnin' things an' we're shufflin' the cards for a new deal. This here tenderfoot which you've been a-slanderin' shameful is man's size an' we're seein' that he gits a fair shake in this here. I reckon you git me?"

Hollis felt Norton poking him in the ribs, but he did not turn; he was too intent upon watching the two principal actors in the scene. Tragedy had been imminent; comedy was slowly gaining the ascendancy. For at the expression that had come over Dunlavey's face several of the men were grinning broadly. Were the stakes not so great Hollis would have felt like smiling himself. Dunlavey seemed stunned. He stood erect, passing his hand over his forehead as though half convinced that the scene were an illusion and that the movement of the hand would dispel it. Sev-

eral times his lips moved, but no words came and he turned, looking about at the men who were gathered around him, scanning their faces for signs that would tell him that they were not in sympathy with Ten Spot. But the faces that he looked upon wore mocking grins and sneers.

“An’ I’ve been tellin’ the boys how you set Yuma on Nellie Hazelton, an’ they’ve come to the conclusion that a guy which will play a low down mean game like that on a woman ain’t no fit guy to have no hand in any law makin’.”

Ten Spot’s voice fell coldly and metallically in the silence of the room. Slowly recovering from the shock Dunlavey attempted a sneer, which gradually faded into a mirthless smile as Ten Spot continued:

“An’ you ain’t goin’ to have a hand in any more law-makin’ in this man’s town. Me an’ my friends is goin’ to see to that, an’ my boss, Mr. Hollis. I reckon that’ll be about all. You don’t need to hang around here while we do the rest of the votin’. Watkins an’ Greasy c’n stay to see that everything goes on regular.” He grinned wickedly as Dunlavey stiffened. “I reckon you know me, Bill. I ain’t palaverin’ none. You an’ Ten Spot is quits!”

He stepped back a little, away from the table, his teeth showing in a mocking grin. Then he

looked down at the hat which he still held in his hand—Dunlavey's hat. He laughed. "Why, I'm cert'nly unpolite!" he said insinuatingly. "Here you've been wantin' to go an' I've been keepin' your hat!" He dumped the ballots upon the table and passed the hat to Dunlavey. Without a word Dunlavey took it, jerking it savagely, placed it on his head, and strode to the door, stepping down into the street.

There was a short silence. Then Ten Spot turned and looked at Hollis, his face wreathed in a broad grin.

"I reckon you-all think you know somethin' about handlin' the law," he said, "but your little Ten Spot ain't exactly the measliest card in the deck! We'll do our votin' now."

A quarter of an hour later, after Ten Spot and his friends had cast their ballots and Watkins had been forced to make out a certificate of nomination,—which reposed safely in Ben Allen's inside pocket—the kerosene lights were extinguished and the men filed out. Hollis and Ten Spot were the last to leave. As they stood for a moment on the threshold of the doorway Hollis seized Ten Spot's hand and gripped it heartily.

"I want to thank you, my friend," he said earnestly.

Ten Spot jerked his hand away. "Aw, hell!" he said as they sought the darkness of the street, "I ain't mushin' none. "But," he added, as a concession to his feelings, "I reckon to know a white man when I see one!"

CHAPTER XXVI

AUTUMN AND THE GODS

IT was Sunday afternoon and a hazy, golden, late September sun was swimming lazily in the blue arc of sky, flooding the lower gallery of the Circle Bar ranchhouse, but not reaching a secluded nook in which sat Hollis and Nellie Hazelton. Mrs. Norton was somewhere in the house and Norton had gone down to the bunkhouse for a talk with the men—Hollis and Nellie could see him, sitting on a bench in the shade of the eaves, the other men gathered about him.

Below the broad level that stretched away from the ranchhouse sank the big basin, sweeping away to the mountains. Miles into the distance the Circle Bar cattle could be seen—moving dots in the center of a great, green bowl. To the right Razor-Back ridge loomed its bald crest upward with no verdure saving the fringe of shrubbery at its base; to the left stretched a vast plain that met the distant horizon that stretched an in-

terminable distance behind the cottonwood. Except for the moving dots there was a total absence of life and movement in the big basin. It spread in its wide, gradual, downward slope, bathed in the yellow sunshine of the new, mellow season, peacefully slumberous, infinitely beautiful.

Many times had Hollis sat in the gallery watching it, his eyes glistening, his soul stirred to awe. Long since had he ceased regretting the glittering tinsel of the cities of his recollection; they seemed artificial, unreal. When he had first gazed out over the basin he had been oppressed with a sensation of uneasiness. Its vastness had appalled him, its silence had aroused in him that vague disquiet which is akin to fear. But these emotions had passed. He still felt awed—he would always feel it, for it seemed that here he was looking upon a section of the world in its primitive state; that in forming this world the creator had been in his noblest mood—so far did the lofty mountains, the wide, sweeping valleys, the towering buttes, and the mighty canyons dwarf the flat hills and the puny shallows of the land he had known. But he was no longer appalled; disquietude had been superseded by love.

It all seemed to hold some mystery for him—

an alluring, soul-stirring mystery. The tawny mountains, immutable guardians of the basin, whose peaks rose somberly in the twilight glow—did they hold it? Or was it hidden in the basin, in the great, green sweep that basked in the eternal sunlight?

Perhaps there was no mystery. Perhaps he felt merely the romance that would inevitably come to one who deeply appreciated the beauty of a land into which he had come so unwillingly? For romance was here.

He turned his head slightly and looked at the girl who sat beside him. She also was looking out over the basin, her eyes filled with a light that thrilled him. He studied her face long, noting the regular features, the slight tan, through which shone the dusky bloom of perfect health; the golden brown hair, with the wind-blown wisps straggling over her temples; he felt the unaccountable, indefinable something that told him of her inborn innocence and purity—qualities that he had worshiped ever since he had been old enough to know the difference between right and wrong.

A deep respect moved him, a reverent smile wreathed his lips. Motherly? Yes, that world-thrilling word aptly described her. And as he continued to look at her he realized that this

world held no mystery for him beyond that which was enthroned in the heart of the girl who sat beside him, unconscious of his thoughts.

He turned again toward the basin. He did not want to uncover the mystery—yet. There were still several things to be done before he would feel free to speak the words that he had meditated upon for some weeks. Meanwhile—if the gods were with him—the solving of the mystery would be the more enjoyable.

Two weeks of inaction had followed the primary incident. Several of Ten Spot's friends were now in his employ; in spite of the drought the Circle Bar had so far experienced a very prosperous season, and, though the addition of the men represented quite an item of expense, he felt that it was much better to employ them than to allow them to be re-engaged by Dunlavey.

He had been able to save considerable money. This he had transferred to a bank in Santa Fé, for he had determined to stay in the West. He had told his mother of this decision and had asked her to come, but she had written that she preferred to remain East for a time—at least until the following spring.

Hollis was satisfied. Affairs were progressing beyond his anticipations. Dunlavey's influ-

ence in the county had received a mighty blow in the defeat of Watkins at the primary; he had received notice of the enactment of several new laws that would appreciably assist him in his fight; he had succeeded in winning many friends because of his attitude on the water question; the increased number of advertisements appearing in the *Kicker* would soon necessitate the addition of an extra sheet. It all presaged prosperity. Yes, he was satisfied. And yet—

He turned again and looked at the girl. This time he caught her watching him. Evidently she had been watching him for a long time for her gaze was fixed and meditative, as though she had been studying him. She started and blushed when he turned and caught her, looking down in sudden and complete confusion. But she looked up again instantly, meeting his gaze steadily, her lips in a frank smile.

“You have been thinking of this country,” she said.

“You have guessed it,” he returned gravely and gently; “I have been thinking of this country—and its people.” He smiled at her, his eyes shining with a light that caused hers to waver and droop. “But how did you discover that?” he questioned. “I was not aware that I had been speaking my thoughts.”

“Do you think it is always necessary to speak?” she answered, looking at him with a quiet smile. “Don’t you think there are times when one’s thoughts find expression in one’s eyes? When we can not conceal them—no matter how hard we try? I know that you were thinking of the country,” she went on earnestly, “because a few moments ago I had been thinking of it too and I know that my emotions were exactly the same as those expressed in your eyes. It is magnificent, isn’t it?” she said in an awed, eager voice. “It is so big, so mighty, so soul-stirring. It allures with its vastness, it dazzles with its beauty; it makes one feel closer to the Creator, even while pressing home a disquieting sense of one’s own insignificance.

“For instance,” she went on, her eyes large and luminous, a new, quiet color coming into her face “there are times when our tasks seem stupendous, when we are filled with an overpowering consciousness of the importance of them; when we feel that we are carrying such a burden that the addition of another would make the load too heavy. Then we look upon God’s work and immediately a still, small voice within us cries: ‘What have ye done in comparison to this?’ And what have we done?” she suddenly demanded.

"Nothing," he returned gravely, awed by this fleeting illuminating glimpse into her soul.

She leaned back into her chair with a smile. "Those were the things I was thinking about. And you, too, were thinking of them," she added. "Now, don't deny it!" she warned, "for I saw it in your eyes!"

"No!" he said with a quick smile; "I don't deny it. But I was thinking of the people also."

"Oh, the people!" she said with a frown.

"Perhaps I should have said 'person,'" he modified with a quick glance at her, under which her eyes drooped in swift confusion—as they had drooped on another occasion which he remembered.

"Oh!" she said merely.

"I have been comparing this person to God's other works," he said, a light in his eyes which told that the former decision to postpone an attempt to uncover the mystery had been ruthlessly put aside, "and I have come to the conclusion that in spite of the infinite care he took in forming the beautiful world out yonder he did not neglect this person to whom I refer."

Her eyes met his in a glance of swift comprehension. She drew a slow, deep breath and averted her face, which was now crimson.

"As you have been able to illustrate man's

insignificance in comparison to God's mighty creations, so has my own inferiority been forced upon me by my attempting to compare myself to the sweet character of the person of whom I speak," said Hollis, his voice low and earnest. "It has been a question whether—when I speak to her of a thing which has been on my mind for many days—she could not with justice paraphrase the question asked by the still, small voice and say: What have you done to deserve this? And I should have to reply—nothing." He had moved closer to her, leaning forward to look into her eyes.

She sat very still, her gaze on the basin. "Perhaps this very estimable person holds other views?" she returned, with a flash of mischief in her eyes. She turned suddenly and looked straight at him, meeting his gaze unwaveringly, a demure smile on her face. "I told you that sometimes a person's thoughts were expressed in their eyes," she said—and now her lashes flickered—"perhaps you can tell what my thoughts are?"

It was a challenge, a defiance, and an unconditional surrender. Like a flash one of Hollis's arms went out—she was drawn, vainly protesting, toward him.

"You haven't answered," she laughed, in a

smothered voice; "you are not certain——"

She did not finish the sentence. Mrs. Norton, coming to the door for a breath of fresh air, halted on the threshold, looked, smiled, and then quietly—very quietly—slipped back into the house.

Away out over the basin a Mexican eagle circled, winging his slow way through the golden sunshine of the afternoon. Miles away the mountain peaks rose somberly, a mysterious, golden halo rising slowly above them. Perhaps there would always be mystery in the mountains, but a certain mystery that had troubled Hollis mightily had been successfully solved. The gods had favored him.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SEAR AND YELLOW DAYS

THIS here town; —read a letter that Hollis received from Weary late in September—
“aint fit for no man to live in which thinks anythink of hisself, in the first place theres two many folks here which dont seem to know what to do with themselves they just keep millin around an actin like they was ready to stampead any time. In the 2nd place im runnin shy of dust an id admire for to receave about a months pay which i wont charge two you bein as ive already spent more then i ought two its a good thing i got a return ticket or id be in a hell of a fix when i got ready to come back last nite the doctor at the hospittle said hed operate on ed today which hes already done this mornin an eds restin easy though the doc dont know whether hes goin to git well or not but hes hopin an ile let you know by telegraph if he gits any worse which is all for this time.

‘ P. S. say boss dont forgit to hustel that coin

ile shure make it right with you i forgot to tell you that i got cleaned out by a card sharper here i would have tore him apart but about a million sheriffs piled onto me an i didnt have no chancst what in hell does any town need with so many sheriffs.

“ Weary.

“ P. S. id like to be home for the round-up but i reckon i wont make it.

“ Weary.”

Nellie Hazelton did not see this letter, though Hollis told her that Ed had been operated on and that he was doing as well as could be expected. And the telegraph that night flashed Weary’s “ coin ” to him.

The days passed all too quickly now, for the time for the fall round-up was at hand and Hollis realized with regret that his daily rides—with Nellie Hazelton as a companion—must soon be discontinued.

The nights had already grown cool; snow had appeared on the mountain peaks; the basin was no longer a great green bowl, but resembled a mammoth, concave palette upon which nature had mixed her colors—yellow and gold and brown, with here and there a blotch of red and purple, a dash of green,—lingering over the season—and great, wide stretches of gray. The

barren spots seemed to grow more barren—mocked by the scarlet blossoms of the cactus that seemed to be everlasting, and the fringing, yellow soap weed, hardy, defying the advancing winter. Razor-Back ridge was a desolate place. Never attractive, it reared aloft barren and somber, frowning down upon its fringe of shrubbery the latter stripped of its leaves, its scant beauty gone and bending its bare branches stubbornly to the early winds.

With the last day of the month came a rain—a cold, bitter, driving storm that raged for three days and started a drift that the cattlemen could not stop. Arrayed in tarpaulins the cowboys went forth, suffering, cursing, laboring heroically to stem the tide. The cattle retreated steadily before the storm—no human agency could halt them. On the second day Norton came into the Circle Bar ranchhouse, wet, disgusted, but fighting mad.

“If this damn rain don’t stop pretty soon,” he told Hollis as he dried himself before the open fireplace, “we’ll have cattle down here from over the Colorado line. An’ then there’ll be hell to pay!”

But on the third day the rain ceased and the sun came out. The country lay smiling in the sunshine, mellow, glistening, inviting. But the

damage had been wrought. From Lemuel Train of the Pig Pen outfit, came word that fifty per cent of his cattle were missing. Truxton of the Diamond Dot, Henningson of the Three Bar, and nearly all of the other small owners, reported losses. Of course the cattle would be recovered during the fall round up, but they were now scattered and fair prey for cattle thieves, and with the round up still two weeks away it seemed that many must be stolen.

Yet there was nothing that could be done; it is folly to attempt to "cut out" cattle on the open range.

From the editorial columns of the *Kicker* might be gleaned the fact that the Law had come into Union County. Many men of Dry Bottom entered the *Kicker* office to thank Hollis; others boldly draped their houses with flags and bunting.

Dunlavey had visited Dry Bottom twice since the incident of the primary. He had said nothing concerning the incident to anyone save possibly his intimates, but from the sneer that appeared on his face when approached by those whom he considered friendly to Hollis it was plain that he intended continuing the fight.

Hollis had been compelled to record in the *Kicker* the unpleasant news that Dunlavey had

refused to comply with the new law regulating brands and the submitting of lists for taxation, and also that he had threatened to shoot the first officer trespassed on his land. Dunlavey had not complied with the law, but he had failed to carry out his threat to "shoot the first officer that trespassed on his land," for Allen had trespassed several times, openly and boldly. Moreover, Dunlavey had seen him, had even spoken to him, but had offered no violence.

Perhaps in a calmer mood Dunlavey had decided not to use his weapon; perhaps there was something about the quiet, cool, and deliberate Allen which convinced Dunlavey that the former might be able to give a good account of himself in the event of trouble. At any rate several times Allen had ridden the Circle Cross range unmolested by either Dunlavey or his men. He explored the farthest limits of the Circle Cross property, tallying the cattle, nosing around the corrals, examining brands, and doing sundry other things not calculated to allay Dunlavey's anger over this new and odd condition of affairs.

Then one day he failed to visit the Circle Cross. Instead, he appeared to Potter in the office of the *Kicker* with copy for a poster announcing the sale by auction of a thousand of Dunlavey's best cattle. He ordered Potter to print it so that he

might post copies throughout the county within a week. The night following the issue of the *Kicker* containing the announcement concerning the coming of the law Potter had informed Hollis that he had that day delivered the notices to Allen.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN DEFIANCE OF THE LAW.

HOLLIS had demonstrated the fact that a majority of Dry Bottom's citizens welcomed the law. Dry Bottom had had a law, to be sure—the law of the six-shooter, with the cleverest man “on the trigger” as its chief advocate. Few men cared to appear before such a court with an argument against its jurisdiction. The law, as the citizens of Dry Bottom had seen it, was an institution which frowned upon such argument. Few men cared to risk an adverse decision of the established court to advocate laws which would come from civilized authority; they had remained silent against the day when it would come in spite of the element that had scoffed at it. And now that day had arrived. The Law had come.

Even the evil element knew it. The atmosphere was vibrant with suppressed excitement; in the stores men and women were congregated; in the saloons rose a buzz of continuous conver-

sation. On the street men greeted one another with subdued voices, or halted one another to discuss the phenomenon. In a dozen conspicuous places were posted flaring, printed notices, informing the reader that a thousand of the Circle Cross cattle—a description of which followed—were, on the following day, to be sold to the highest bidder. Below this announcement, in small, neat print, was quoted the Law.

Dry Bottom gasped. The saloons swarmed. In the Fashion two bartenders and the proprietor labored heroically to supply their customers with the liquid stimulant which would nerve them to look upon Ben Allen's posters with a certain degree of equanimity. The reckless element—the gun-men who in a former day were wont to swagger forth with reckless disregard for the polite conventions—skulked in the background, sneering at this thing which had come to rob them of their power and which, they felt, presaged their ultimate downfall.

But Dry Bottom ignored the gun-men, or smiled blandly at them, giving its attention to Ben Allen's posters and discussing a rumor which had gained rapid credence, to the effect that the new governor had telegraphed Allen that he would hold a detail of United States soldiers in readiness for any contingency.

The good citizens smiled. And throughout the day many of them passed and repassed the *Kicker* office, anxious to get a glimpse of the man who had been instrumental in bringing about this innovation.

Shortly after noon on the same day Dunlavey rode into Dry Bottom, dismounted, hitched his pony to the rail in front of the Fashion, and entered.

In former days Dunlavey's appearance within the doors of the Fashion was the signal for boisterous greetings. For here might always be found the law's chief advocates. To-day, however, there were no greetings. Minds were filled with vague and picturesque conjecture concerning Dunlavey's probable actions and the outcome of this strange affair. Thus upon Dunlavey's entrance a silence—strange and awkward—fell in the bar-room. There were short nods and men fell away from Dunlavey as he crossed the room and came to a halt before one of Ben Allen's posters. He read every line of it—every word. No man interrupted him. Then, finishing his reading, he turned and faced the crowd, his face white with wrath, his lips snarling.

"Why in hell didn't some of you damned fools tear this down?" he demanded.

No man felt it incumbent upon him to reply to

this and Dunlavey watched them for an instant, sneering, his eyes glittering menacingly. Then he suddenly turned, seized the poster, savagely tore it into pieces, hurled the pieces to the floor, and stamped upon them. Then he turned again to the silent crowd, his face inflamed, his voice snapping with a bitter, venomous sarcasm.

"Scared!" he said. "Scared out clean—like a bunch of coyotes runnin' from the daylight!" He made a strange sound with his lips, expressing his unutterable contempt for men so weakly constituted.

"Quit!" he grated. "Quit clean because a tenderfoot comes out here and tries to run things! So long as things come your way you're willing to stick it out, but when things go the other way—Ugh!"

He turned abruptly, strode out through the door, mounted his pony, and rode rapidly down the street. Several of the men, who went to the door after his departure, saw him riding furiously toward the Circle Cross.

Then one of his former friends laughed harshly—sarcastically. "I reckon that there tenderfoot is botherin' Big Bill a whole lot," he said as he turned to the bar.

It had been a busy day for Hollis. His hand

had been shaken so much that it pained him. The day had been a rather warm one for the season and so when late in the afternoon Norton rode into town, "To see the excitement," he told Hollis, the latter determined to make the return trip to the Circle Bar in the evening. Therefore, after a short conference with Judge Graney and Allen—and a frugal, though wholesome supper in the Judge's rooms back of the court house—which Allen cooked—he and Norton rode out upon the Coyote trail and jogged quitely toward the Circle Bar.

There was a good moon; the air was invigorating, though slightly chill, and the trail lay clear and distinct before them, hard after the rain, ideal for riding.

Many times during the first half hour of the ride Norton looked furtively at his chief. Certain things that Mrs. Norton had told him held a prominent place in his thoughts, and mingling with these thoughts was the recollection of a conversation that he had held with Hollis one day when both of them had been riding this same trail and Hollis had stopped off at the Hazelton cabin. Many times Norton smiled. He would have liked to refer to that conversation, but hesitated for fear of seeming to meddle with that which did not concern him. He remembered the days

of his own courtship—how jealously he had guarded his secret.

But the longer his thoughts dwelt upon the incident that had been related to him by Mrs. Norton the harder it became to keep silent. But he managed to repress his feelings for the first half hour and then, moved by an internal mirth that simply would not be held in check longer, he cackled aloud.

He saw Hollis shoot a quick glance at him. He cackled again, his mirth swelling as he caught the surprised and puzzled expression of Hollis's face.

"I have a very original opinion of people who laugh without any visible cause," remarked the latter, grinning reluctantly in the semi-darkness.

Norton's reply was another cackle. They rode in silence for a long time.

Then Norton spoke. "This is a great country," he said.

Silence from Hollis, though taking a quick glance at him Norton again observed the puzzled grin on his face.

"And original," he remarked, placing upon the latter word the same peculiar emphasis that Hollis had given it a moment before.

Hollis grinned widely; he began to detect a subtle meaning in the range boss's speech and ac-

tions. But he did not answer; it would not strain his patience to await until such a time as Norton made his meaning clear.

"But there's some things that ain't original," continued Norton in the same tone, after another short silence.

This remark clearly required comment. Hollis grinned mildly. "Meaning what?" he questioned.

Norton met his gaze gravely. "Meanin' that the ways of makin' love are pretty much the same in every country." He laughed. "I know there's different ways of makin' it—in books," he continued; "the folks which write books make their men an' women go at it all kinds of ways. But did you ever know anyone in real life to make love to a girl any different than anyone else?"

"I have had no experience in love making," returned Hollis, puzzled again.

Norton cackled. "No," he said, "an' that's the peculiar part of it. Mostly no one has ever had any experience when they start to makin' love the first time. But they all make it the same way. That's why it ain't original. You take a man which has got in love with a girl—any man. He don't want anyone to know that he's in love with her—he feels sorta sheepish about it.

Goes around hangin' his head an' blushin', an' mostly not sayin' anything about it. Once he gets it into his system he ain't the same man any more. Takes to actin' reserved like an' gentle. But them that's had experience can see the symptoms. There ain't no way to hide it."

Had Norton looked at Hollis now he might have observed a touch of red in the young man's face. But he did not look; he was watching the trail ahead, smiling broadly.

They had been riding through a deep depression, going toward a ridge whose crest was fringed with dense, tangled shrubbery. Hollis was about to reply to Norton's remark when he saw the latter's lips suddenly straighten; saw his body stiffen as he drew himself erect in the saddle and pulled his pony abruptly up. Surprised, Hollis also reined in and sat silent, looking at Norton.

The latter's hand went to one of his ears, the fingers spreading out, fan like. "Listen!" he warned sharply.

Hollis had been listening. A low rumble greeted his ears. He looked suddenly upward at the sky, fearful that another storm, such as he had encountered months before, might be forming. But the sky was cloudless. He looked again at Norton. The latter's eyes shone brightly

in the moonlight, as he leaned toward Hollis. The rumbling had grown more distinct.

"It ain't a stampede," said Norton rapidly; "there wouldn't be anything to stampede cattle on a night like this. An' them's cattle!"

It was about a hundred yards to the ridge toward which they had been riding and Hollis saw Norton suddenly plunge the spurs into his pony's flanks; saw the animal rush forward. He gave his own animal the spurs and in an instant was at Norton's side, racing toward the ridge. The range boss dismounted at the bottom, swiftly threw the reins over his pony's head, and running stealthily toward the crest. Hollis followed him. When he reached Norton's side the latter was flat on a rim rock at the edge of a little cliff, behind some gnarled brush. Below them the country stretched away for miles, level, unbroken, basking in the moonlight. Hollis recognized the section as that through which he had traveled on the night he had been overtaken by the storm—the big level that led to Big Elk crossing, where he had met Dunlavey and his men that night.

Looking out upon the plain he held his breath in amazement. During the time he had been at the Circle Bar he had seen cattle running, but never had he seen them run like this. About a

quarter of a mile from the ridge on which he and Norton stood rose a dust cloud—moving swiftly. But ahead of the cloud, heads down, their horns tossing were a number of cattle, perhaps fifty, racing furiously. They were running parallel with the ridge and would probably pass it. Behind and flanking them raced several cowboys, silent, driving with their quirts.

“Rustlers!” came Norton’s voice from beside him. “They’re headin’ for Big Elk!”

Hollis had brought his rifle, which he had carried since the attack on the night of the storm. At Norton’s word he raised it. But Norton’s hand touched his and his voice came again, sharply, commandingly.

“Don’t shoot!” he said. “It wouldn’t do any good; some of them would get away. Mebbe they’ll come close enough so’s we can see who they are!”

Hollis waited breathlessly. It seemed that but an instant had passed from the time he had caught a first glimpse of them until they were thundering by the ridge and he and Norton were blinded by the dust. They had gone before the dust settled, but through it as they passed, Hollis had caught sight of a familiar figure. Before the thunder of hoofs had died away Hollis felt Norton’s hand on his arm and his voice in his ear.

“Dunlavey!”

There could be no doubt of that, for Hollis had recognized him also. He turned, to hear Norton's dry voice in his ear.

“The new law don't seem to be botherin' Dunlavey a heap,” he said.

Hollis stepped boldly out on the ridge, his face grim and pale. But he was pulled back by Norton. “I take it you don't want to let them see you,” he said. “When a thing like that comes off there's always somebody sure to be lookin' back.” He was pulling at Hollis's arm, directing his steps down the slope toward where they had left the horses. “You an' me ain't enough,” he was saying to Hollis; “we'll hit the breeze to the Circle Bar, get some of the boys, an' hustle back here an' take them cattle!”

Hollis accompanied him willingly as far as the horses. Then he halted, his eyes flashing brightly. “We won't go to the Circle Bar,” he said. “We won't fight them like that. There is a law in this country now and I am going to see that the law acts!” He seized Norton's arm in a firm commanding grip. “You follow them,” he directed. “From the edge of the butte where they caught me on the night of the storm you can see the country for miles. Don't cross the river,” he warned. “Stay there beside

the butte until I come back—I won't be long. Watch where they take the cattle!"

Before Norton could offer a word of objection he was on his pony and racing over the back trail at terrific speed. For a moment Norton watched him. Then he disappeared and Norton grimly mounted his pony and rode down to the level, following the trail taken by the thieves.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE ARM OF THE LAW

THE lights in Dry Bottom's saloons were flickering brightly when Hollis rode down the street and dismounted from his drooping pony in front of the court house. He ran stiffly around the side of the building and knocked loudly on a door. There was a short silence and then a movement inside and Ben Allen stuck his head out of a window. He saw at a glance the upward turned face of the nocturnal visitor and called shortly: "Wait! I'll be down!"

There was a short wait, during which Hollis impatiently paced back and forth and then Allen appeared in the door, fully dressed. Judge Graney, in a night shirt, stood behind him.

"Something's up, of course," drawled Allen as he stepped down from the door, "or you wouldn't come around disturbing folks this way. What is it?"

Hollis briefly related the events of the night,

concluding with the statement that he was determined to force the law to act.

"Correct!" laughed Allen. "She's got to act now." He caught Hollis's arm and turned him toward a small cottonwood grove about half a mile distant. A dozen white objects dotting the grove caught Hollis's gaze. He started.

"Soldiers!" he exclaimed.

"I might say that was a good guess," drawled Allen. "I sent for them because I thought I might need them if our friend Dunlavey got to cuttin' up any. It's been my experience that a detail of Uncle Sam's boys is about as good a thing to have around in case of trouble as any man could want."

"But you can't use them in this case," remarked Judge Graney, who had stepped down beside the two men. "The governor's instructions were that they should be used merely as an instrument in enforcing the court's order regarding the sale of Dunlavey's cattle. The theft of the Circle Bar cattle is a matter which comes directly under the jurisdiction of the sheriff. If he refuses to act——"

"Hell!" broke in Allen. "We know he won't do anything!"

The Judge smiled slightly. "I suspect he won't," he said dryly. He winked at Hollis.

“Being a judge in this district I am, of course, averse to advising any infractions of the law. But if I were not a judge I would suggest that two strong, energetic men—such as you appear to be——” He leaned forward and whispered in Allen’s ear, whereat that gentleman let out a joyous whoop and almost dragged Hollis around the corner of the building toward the street, leaving the Judge standing in the doorway.

Once on the street Allen set a pace that brought the two to the door of the sheriff’s office quickly. A light shone through the window and when Allen opened the door Watkins was sitting beside his desk, gravely fumbling a deck of cards. He dropped them when he saw his visitors and made a quick movement with his right hand toward his revolver. But Allen’s weapon was already out.

“Bill,” he said in a soft, even voice, “we’re wantin’ a warrant for the arrest of Bill Dunlavey. The charge is stealin’ cattle. Of course you’ll issue it,” he added insinuatingly.

Watkins’s face slowly paled. “Why——” he began.

“Of course I knowed you wouldn’t do it when I asked you,” said Allen with a dangerously soft smile. “That’s why I come down here. This town’s got a sheriff an’ it ain’t. I wouldn’t care

a damn if it didn't have you. There's lots of folks wouldn't care either. So that if you're one of them which does care you're settin' right still an' not sayin' anything which can be construed as talk till my friend here goes down to the station." He whispered to Hollis. "Be middlin' rapid," he said aloud afterward, "an' use my name." He turned to Watkins with a smile. "While we're waitin' I'll do some talkin'," he said. "But if you let out one little wee chirp them folks which don't care about you bein' sheriff of this man's town will sure have a heap of cause to rejoice."

Hollis was already far down the street toward the station. When he got there the station was dark—evidently the agent had gone to bed. Hollis pounded heavily on the door and presently the agent opened it, appearing in his night shirt, a heavy six-shooter in hand, his eyes blinking.

"My name is Hollis," said the latter from the darkness; "I want you to telegraph the governor."

"Come in." The agent disappeared within, Hollis following. "This way," he directed, as he disappeared through another door leading into the station, his night shirt flapping about his lean legs. "What you wantin' to telegraph?" he questioned, as he seated himself before the instru-

ment and looked up at Hollis. And then, before the latter could answer he continued: "You're the durndest man to stir up a muss I ever seen in my life!"

Hollis smiled grimly as he seized a blank and wrote his message to the governor:

"Cattle thieves caught red-handed. Sheriff refuses to act. Crisis. Suggest you appoint me temporarily.

"BEN ALLEN."

The agent took the message, read it, and then monotonously began to drum on the keys of his instrument.

Hollis found it impossible to sit still and so he nervously paced up and down the room during the sending of the message. The agent finished and leaned his head sleepily on the table.

"Ought to answer in half an hour—if he's home," he informed Hollis. Upon which Hollis slipped out of the door and returned down the street to the sheriff's office, peering within. Watkins still sat at the table and in a chair near him lounged Allen, talking volubly. Hollis watched for a time and then returned to the station to find the agent asleep beside his instrument. Hollis had scarcely awakened him when the sounder began its monotonous ticking.

He leaned over the agent's shoulder and read the governor's answer as the agent sleepily wrote it down.

"Ben Allen: You are hereby appointed sheriff of Union County in place of W. Watkins, dismissed. Have Judge certify."

"I reckon there must be somethin' goin' on," remarked the agent. "What's the matter with Bill——?"

But Hollis had snatched the message from his hand and was out into the street in an instant and running down toward the sheriff's office. When he arrived there Allen was still talking. He passed the telegram to him and the latter rose to his feet and smiled at Watkins, shoving the message under his nose.

"You can read her," he said. "Then you can go home an' quit sheriffin'—after I've got through with you. You've been called down to the court house. I'm takin' you, chargin' you with bein' an accessory before the fact, or somethin' like that. It don't make no difference what it is, you're goin' with me." His voice came sharp and chill: "Jump!"

Judge Graney had dressed himself by the time the three arrived at the court house and Watkins was roughly tumbled into the room which had

been set aside as the jail. Then the judge led Hollis and Allen into the court room where he issued Allen's certificate of appointment.

"Now, I reckon we won't have no trouble in gettin' the soldiers," he grinned. "This sheriff is goin' to act!"

CHAPTER XXX

FORMING A FRIENDSHIP

AT three o'clock in the afternoon Hollis closed his desk and announced to Potter that he was going to the Circle Bar. Potter watched him with a fond smile as he went out the door and placed the saddle on his pony, mounted and rode into the sunshine of the afternoon. The presence of the troopers in town had created a sensation and most of the town's citizens were gathered about the court house, curiously watching Dunlavey and several of his men who had been taken into custody during the early hours of the morning. Neither Hollis or Norton had been allowed to participate in the final scene, the little captain informing them curtly that the presence of civilians at what promised to be a free-for-all fight was strictly forbidden. And so Norton had returned to the Circle Bar, while Hollis had gone to Dry Bottom to finish an article for the next issue of the *Kicker*.

It had been in that bald, gray time between darkness and dawn when Ben Allen and Hollis, riding at the head of the detail of troopers beside the dapper little captain, had arrived at the edge of the butte where Hollis had directed Norton to await his coming.

Norton's only comment upon seeing the troopers had been: "Where in hell did them come from?"

He told Allen that he had watched where Dunlavey and his men had driven the cattle, and that he would find them concealed in a narrow defile between two hills about a mile on the other side of the Rabbit-Ear. He and Hollis had announced their intention to accompany the troop to the scene, but had been refused permission by the captain.

The capture of the thieves had been quite a simple matter. In single file the troopers had descended the slope of the river, crossed a shallow, and clattered up the other side. A mile dash at a gallop had brought them to one end of the defile mentioned by Norton, and in a grove of fir-balsam the captain had deployed his troopers and swooped suddenly down into the defile, surprising several men, who with Dunlavey, were busily at work altering the brands on the cattle they had stolen. There was a fire near the

center of the defile, with branding irons scattered about it.

The stolen cattle bore various brands. There were perhaps a dozen belonging to the Circle Bar, several from the Pig Pen; others bore the brands of the Three Bar and the Diamond Dot.

Proof of Dunlavey's guilt had been absolute. He had made some resistance, but had been quickly overpowered by Allen and the troopers. Then with their prisoners the troops had returned to Dry Bottom.

Hollis rode slowly toward the Circle Bar. He was tired—dead tired. When he arrived at the Hazelton cabin the shade on the porch looked so inviting that he dismounted, tied his pony to one of the slender porch columns, and seated himself, leaning wearily against the column to which he had tied his pony.

He sat there long, staring at a clump of nondescript weed that fringed the edge of the arroyo near the cabin, his thoughts filled with pictures of incidents that had occurred to him during his stay in the West. Nellie Hazelton appeared in every one of these pictures and therefore he smiled often.

He had not liked the country when he had first come here; it had seemed to offer him no field for the pursuit of his ambition. Certainly the rais-

ing of cattle had never entered into his scheme of things. Yet he now realized that there was plenty of room in this country for success in this particular industry; all a man had to do was to keep up his end until the law came. And now the law had come and he had been partly responsible for its coming. The realization of this moved his lips into a grim smile.

He filled and lighted his pipe, smoking placidly as he leaned against the slender column, his gaze shifting to a clump of dense shrubbery that skirted the trail within twenty feet of the cabin. He sat quiet, his long legs stretched out to enjoy the warmth of the sun that struck a corner of the porch floor. His pipe spluttered in depletion and he raised himself and looked around for his pony, observing that the animal was contentedly browsing the tops of some weeds at the edge of the porch. Then, resigning himself to the sensation of languor that oppressed him, he knocked the ash from the pipe, filled it again, lighted it, and resumed his former reclining position.

During the past few days he had given much thought to Dunlavey. He was thinking of the man now, as his gaze went again to the clump of shrubbery that skirted the trail.

Some men's mental processes were incompre-

hensible. Dunlavey was one of these men. What did the man hope to gain by defying the law? Would there not be profit enough in the cattle business when conducted honestly?

He felt a certain contempt for the man, but mingled with it was a sort of grim pity. No doubt Dunlavey felt justified in his actions, for he had lived here a good many years, no doubt suffering the privations encountered by all pioneers; living a hard life, dealing heavy blows to his enemies, and receiving some himself. No doubt his philosophy of life had been of the peculiar sort practiced by the feudal barons of the Old World, before civilization had come, carrying its banner of justice, which, summed up epigrammatically, though ironically, had been "Might is Right." But might could never be right in this country. Dunlavey must learn this lesson; he could not hope to—!

Hollis sat suddenly erect, putting aside his pipe and his ruminations at the same instant, the languor gone from him, his eyes narrowing coldly.

For suddenly, from behind the shrubbery that skirted the edge of the trail, had appeared the man about whom he had been thinking! It was evident that he had not come upon Hollis unexpectedly. He reined in his pony and sat motion-

less in the saddle, his face white, his eyes alight with passion.

For an instant neither man spoke. Hollis realized that the great moment for which he had waited many days had arrived. And it had arrived unexpectedly. It had arrived to find him tired after his activities of the night and in no condition for a fight. He drew a deep breath and got to his feet, a grim smile on his face. He stepped off the porch and stood by one of the columns, watching Dunlavey closely. As he watched the grim smile on his face slowly faded, his lips curled bitterly, his eyes chilled.

"I suppose you've come to collect that thrashing?" he said.

Dunlavey dismounted quickly, his right hand flew to his holster, drawing his revolver. He came toward Hollis crouching, a cold, merciless glitter in his eyes.

"Yes, you tenderfoot ———." he snarled.

* * * *

From the moment of Hollis's arrival at the court house the night before Ben Allen had been constantly in action. It was late in the morning when he had returned to the court house with his prisoners. The men who had been captured with Dunlavey were still with the troopers, there not being sufficient room at the court house for

them. Watkins had been released and Dunlavey had taken his place in the little room that answered for a jail. Shortly before noon Allen proceeded to the station, where he telegraphed to the governor the story of the capture. He had then deputized a dozen punchers and sent them to the Circle Cross to round up a thousand of Dunlavey's cattle and hold them until the late afternoon when, according to Allen's published program, they were to be sold to the highest bidder. Then, tired and hungry, Allen sought the Alhambra and ate a hearty meal.

Dry Bottom was swarming with visitors that had come in for the sale. But by the time Allen had finished eating the exodus had begun. The trail leading to the Circle Cross ranch was dotted with probable bidders, curiosity seekers, idlers, and mere residents of the town. Now that the law had come there were many who discovered that their sympathies had always been with the men who had championed it. Allen found his way to the court house strewn with men who halted him to express their good will. Many people gathered in front of the *Kicker* office, eager for a glimpse of Hollis. Those who gathered there before twelve-thirty saw him seated at his desk, tall, angular, serious of face, absolutely unaffected by this thing which had caused a sensa-

tion. Passing the *Kicker* office on his way to the court house, Allen had paused to look within and shout a greeting to him. Then he had continued on his way.

Arriving at the court house Allen looked in at Dunlavey to find him lying on the floor, apparently asleep. Allen did not disturb him. He went out, threw the saddle on his pony, and rode over to the grove where the soldiers were quartered, talking long with the captain. At two o'clock he returned to the court house to be greeted with the news that Dunlavey had escaped. Allen did not stop to inquire how the escape had been accomplished. He remounted his pony and raced down to the *Kicker* office, fearing that Dunlavey had gone there. Potter informed him that his chief had departed for the Circle Bar fully an hour and a half before. He had taken the Coyote trail—Potter had watched him.

Allen wheeled his pony and returned to the court house. He was met at the door by Judge Graney. The latter's face was white and drawn with fear.

"He's gone to kill Hollis!" the judge told him through white, set lips. "I heard him threaten Hollis this morning and a moment ago a man told me that he had seen Dunlavey, not

over half an hour ago, riding out the Coyote trail at a dead run!"

Allen's own face whitened. He did not stop to answer but drove the spurs deep into his pony's flanks and rode furiously down the street toward a point near the *Kicker* office where he struck the trail.

The distance to the Circle Bar ranch was ten miles and Dunlavey had a good half hour's start! He fairly lifted his pony over the first mile, though realizing that he could not hope to arrive at the Circle Bar in time to prevent Dunlavey from carrying out his design to kill Hollis. No, he told himself as he rode, he could not prevent him from killing Hollis, should he catch the latter unprepared, but he promised himself that Dunlavey should not escape punishment for the deed.

He had had some hope that Dunlavey would accept his defeat philosophically. The latter was not the only man he had seen who had been defeated by the law. Over in Colfax County and up in Wyoming he had dealt with many such men, and usually, after they had seen that the law was inevitable, they had resigned themselves to the new condition and had become pretty fair citizens. He had imagined that Dunlavey would prove to be no exception, that after the

first sting of defeat had been removed he would meet his adversaries half way in an effort to patch up their differences. The danger was in the time immediately following the realization of defeat. A man of the Dunlavey type was then usually desperate.

So Allen communed with himself as he rode at a head-long pace down the Coyote trail, risking his neck a dozen times. Not once since he had left Dry Bottom had he considered his own danger.

He had been riding more than half an hour, and was coming up out of a little gully when he came upon a riderless pony, and close by it, browsing near a clump of shrubbery, another. He recognized one of them instantly as Dunlavey's, and his teeth came together with a snap. He rode closer to the other pony, examining it. On one of its hips was a brand—the Circle Bar. Allen's face whitened again. He had arrived too late. But he would not be too late to wreak vengeance upon Dunlavey.

He dismounted and cautiously approached the brush at the side of the trail. Parting it, he saw the roof of a cabin. He recognized it; he had passed it a number of times during his exploration of the country. He drew back and crept farther along in the brush, certain that he

would presently see Dunlavey. But he had not gone very far when he heard voices and he cautiously parted the brush again and peered through.

He started back in surprise, an incredulous grin slowly appearing on his face. The incredulity changed to amusement a moment later—when he heard Hollis's voice!

The young man was seated on the edge of the porch—smoking a pipe! Near him, seated on a flat rock, his face horribly puffed out, with several ugly gashes disfiguring it, his eyes blackened, his clothing in tatters, one hand hanging limply by his side, the fingers crushed and bleeding, was Dunlavey! Near him, almost buried in the sand, was a revolver. Allen's smile broadened when he saw Dunlavey's empty holster. Evidently he had met with a surprise!

While taking in these details Allen had not forgotten to listen to Hollis as the latter talked to Dunlavey. Apparently Hollis had about finished his talk, for his voice was singularly soft and even, and Dunlavey's almost comical air of dejection could not have settled over him in an instant.

. . . “and so of course I had to thrash you—you had it coming to you. You haven't been a man—you've acted like a sneak and a cur all

through this business. You made a thrashing inevitable when you set Yuma on Nellie Hazelton. You'll have plenty of marks to remind you of the one you gave me that night." He pointed to his cheek. "I've got even for that. But I think I wouldn't have trimmed you quite so bad if you hadn't tried to shoot me a few minutes ago."

He puffed silently at his pipe for a short time, during which Dunlavey sat on the rock and squinted pathetically at him. Then he resumed:

"I've heard people talk of damned fools, but never, until I met you, have I been unfortunate enough to come into personal contact with one. I should think that when you saw the soldiers had come you would have surrendered decently. Perhaps you know by now that you can't fight the United States Army—and that you can't whip me. If you've got any sense left at all you'll quit fighting now and try your best to be a good citizen."

He smiled grimly as he rose from the porch and walked to where Dunlavey sat, standing over him and looking down at him.

"Dunlavey," he said, extending his right hand to the beaten man, "let's call it quits. You've been terribly worked up, but you ought to be over it now. You ought to be able to see

that it doesn't go. I've thrashed you pretty badly, but you and your men used me up pretty well that night and so it's an even thing. Let's shake and be friends. If you show signs of wanting to be a man again I'll withdraw the charge of cattle stealing which I have placed against you, and I imagine I won't have any trouble in inducing Allen to call off that auction sale and accept settlement of the claim against you."

Until now Dunlavey had avoided looking at the outstretched hand. But now he looked at it, took it and held it for an instant, his bruised and swollen face taking on an expression of lugubrious self-pity.

"I reckon I've got it in the neck all around," he said finally. "But I ain't no squealer and I've got——" His gaze met Hollis's and his eyes gleamed with a reluctant admiration. "By God, you're white! I reckon you could have tore the rest of me apart like you did my hand." He held up the injured member for inspection.

Allen's grin could grow no broader, and now he showed his increased satisfaction with a subdued cackle. He backed stealthily out of the shrubbery, taking a final glance at the two men. He saw Hollis leading Dunlavey toward a small water hole at the rear of the cabin; saw him bath-

ing Dunlavey's injured hand and binding it with his handkerchief.

Then Allen proceeded to his pony, mounted, and departed for the court house to tell Judge Graney the news that kept his own face continually in a smile.

CHAPTER XXXI

AFTERWARD

FROM Razor-Back ridge the big basin spread away to the Blue Peak mountains. On the opposite side of the ridge began the big plain on which, snuggled behind some cottonwood trees, were the Circle Cross buildings. From where Hollis and Nellie Hazelton sat on the ridge they could look miles down the Coyote trail, into Devil's Hollow; could see the two big cottonwood trees that stood beside Big Elk crossing, above which, on the night of the storm, Hollis had been attacked by Dunlavey's men. Back on the stretch of plain above the basin they could make out the Circle Bar buildings, lying close to the banks of the river.

It was in the late afternoon and the sun had gone down behind the Blue Peaks, though its last rays were just touching the crest of the ridge near Hollis and Nellie. He had called her attention to the sinking sun, telling her that it was time they started for the Circle Bar.

"Wait," she said; "someone is coming up the

Coyote trail. I have been watching him for ten minutes."

Hollis faced the trail and watched also. In a quarter of an hour the horseman came out of Devil's Hollow. Hollis and Nellie could see him plainly as he guided his pony around the huge boulders that filled the place. Hollis smiled whimsically.

"It's the poet," he told Nellie, catching her gaze and grinning widely at her. "I sent him to Dry Bottom this noon for the mail—Potter is going to stay in town over night."

For an instant it seemed that Ace would not see them, and Hollis rose from the rock on which he had been sitting and halloed to him. He responded with a shout and urged his pony up the steep side of the slope and then along the crest until he came within a few feet of where they sat. He dismounted and came forward, grinning broadly.

"Takin' the view?" he questioned. His eyes twinkled. "Sometimes there's a heap of poetry could be got out of this county. But——" and his eyelashes flickered slightly—"a fellow's got to be in the right frame of mind to get it out. I reckon you two——"

"I suppose you got the mail?" interrupted Hollis, grimacing at him.

"I sure did," returned the poet, "one letter. I reckon the blacksmith'll be kickin' because I've been galivantin' around the country for one letter. Here it is." He passed an envelope to Hollis, and the latter, with a quick glance at the legend in the upper left hand corner, tore it open and read. It was from Weary.

Dear boss i got cleaned out agin what did you send me a hundred dollars for you might have knowed that id make a gol darned fool of myself with so much coin i never could keep no coin no how but its all right anyway cause me an eds comin home tomorrow eds all right except bein a littel week which the doc says he git over in a littel while.

ta ta.

WEARY.

P. S. i might have telegraphed but ed says it dont make no difference cause the letter will git there quick enough any way an hes afraid a telegram will scare some one. im dam glad i got a return ticket.

WEARY.

After reading the letter Hollis passed it over to Nellie, watching her, his eyes alight with satisfaction.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh!" The letter dropped from her hand, was caught by the breezes and swirled several feet distant. Ace sprang to recover it. When he turned, the letter in hand, he

saw something that brought a huge grin of sympathy to his face. But mingled with the sympathy was another emotion.

“Boss,” he said, as Hollis, disengaging himself, turned and faced him, “I’ve writ quite a nice little thing on ‘Love.’ Mebbe you’d like to——”

He caught Hollis’s frown and immediately retreated to his pony, his grin broadening as he went. He cackled with mirth as Hollis’s voice reached him.

“Ace,” it said gravely, “don’t attempt to write a poem on ‘Love’ until you’ve had some experience.”

“You havin’ yours now?” insinuated Ace, as he mounted his pony.

He alone caught Hollis’s reply. It was an expressive wink.

THE END

THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. A WOMAN ON THE TRAIL	11
II. THE DIM TRAIL	40
III. CONVERGING TRAILS	53
IV. THIS PICTURE AND THAT	72
V. DAKOTA EVENS A SCORE	88
VI. KINDRED SPIRITS	111
VII. BOGGED DOWN	121
VIII. SHEILA FANS A FLAME	146
IX. STRICTLY BUSINESS	163
X. DUNCAN ADDS TWO AND TWO	196
XI. A PARTING AND A VISIT	215
XII. A MEETING ON THE RIVER TRAIL	231
XIII. THE SHOT IN THE BACK	254
XIV. LANGFORD LAYS OFF THE MASK	275
XV. THE PARTING ON THE RIVER TRAIL	303
XVI. SHERIFF ALLEN TAKES A HAND	310
XVII. DOUBLER TALKS	323
XVIII. FOR DAKOTA	336
XIX. SOME MEMORIES	344
XX. INTO THE UNKNOWN	359

THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY

CHAPTER I

A WOMAN ON THE TRAIL

MANY disquieting thoughts oppressed Miss Sheila Langford as she halted her pony on the crest of a slight rise and swept the desolate and slumberous world with an anxious glance. Quite the most appalling of these thoughts developed from a realization of the fact that she had lost the trail. The whole categorical array of inconveniences incidental to traveling in a new, unsettled country paled into insignificance when she considered this horrifying and entirely unromantic fact. She was lost; she had strayed from the trail, she was alone and night was coming.

She would not have cared so much about the darkness, for she had never been a coward, and had conditions been normal she would have asked nothing better than a

12 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

rapid gallop over the dim plains. But as she drew her pony up on the crest of the rise a rumble of thunder reached her ears. Of course it would rain, now that she had lost the trail, she decided, yielding to a sudden, bitter anger. It usually did rain when one was abroad without prospect of shelter; it always rained when one was lost.

Well, there was no help for it, of course, and she had only herself to blame for the blunder. For the other—not unusual—irritating details that had combined to place her in this awkward position she could blame, first Duncan, the manager of the Double R—who should have sent someone to meet her at the station; the station agent—who had allowed her to set forth in search of the Double R without a guide,—though even now, considering this phase of the situation, she remembered that the agent had told her there was no one to send—and certainly the desolate appearance of Lazette had borne out this statement; and last, she could blame the country itself for being an unfeathered wilderness.

Something might be said in extenuation

of the station agent's and the Double R manager's sins of omission, but without doubt the country was what she had termed it—an unfeatured wilderness. Her first sensation upon getting a view of the country had been one of deep disappointment. There was plenty of it, she had decided,—enough to make one shrink from its very bigness; yet because it was different from the land she had been accustomed to she felt that somehow it was inferior. Her father had assured her of its beauty, and she had come prepared to fall in love with it, but within the last half hour—when she had begun to realize that she had lost the trail—she had grown to hate it.

She hated the desolation, the space, the silence, the arid stretches; she had made grimaces at the “cactuses” with their forbidding pricklers—though she could not help admiring them, they seemed to be the only growing thing in the country capable of defying the heat and the sun. Most of all she hated the alkali dust. All afternoon she had kept brushing it off her clothing and clearing it out of her throat, and only within the

14 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

last half hour she had begun to realize that her efforts had been without result—it lay thick all over her; her throat was dry and parched with it, and her eyes burned.

She sat erect, flushed and indignant, to look around at the country. A premonitory calm had succeeded the warning rumble. Ominous black clouds were scurrying, wind-whipped, spreading fan-like through the sky, blotting out the colors of the sunset, darkening the plains, creating weird shadows. Objects that Sheila had been able to see quite distinctly when she had reined in her pony were no longer visible. She stirred uneasily.

“We’ll go somewhere,” she said aloud to the pony, as she urged the animal down the slope. “If it rains we’ll get just as wet here as we would anywhere else.” She was surprised at the queer quiver in her voice. She was going to be brave, of course, but somehow there seemed to be little consolation in the logic of her remark.

The pony shambled forward, carefully picking its way, and Sheila mentally thanked the station agent for providing her with so

reliable a beast. There was one consoling fact at any rate, and she retracted many hard things she had said in the early part of her ride about the agent.

Shuffling down the slope the pony struck a level. After traveling over this for a quarter of an hour Sheila became aware of an odd silence; looking upward she saw that the clouds were no longer in motion; that they were hovering, low and black, directly overhead. A flash of lightning suddenly illuminated the sky, showing Sheila a great waste of world that stretched to four horizons. It revealed, in the distance, the naked peaks of some hills; a few frowning buttes that seemed to fringe a river; some gullies in which lurked forbidding shadows; clumps of desert growth—the cactus—now seeming grotesque and mocking; the snaky octilla; the filmy, rustling mesquite; the dust-laden sage-brush; the soap weed; the sentinel lance of the yucca. Then the light was gone and darkness came again.

Sheila shuddered and vainly tried to force down a queer lump that had risen in her throat over the desolation of it all. It was

16 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

not anything like her father had pictured it! Men had the silly habit of exaggerating in these things, she decided—they were rough themselves and they made the mistake of thinking that great, grim things were attractive. What beauty was there, for instance, in a country where there was nothing but space and silence and grotesque weeds—and rain? Before she could answer this question a sudden breeze swept over her; a few large drops of rain dashed into her face, and her thoughts returned to herself.

The pony broke into a sharp lope and she allowed it to hold the pace, wisely concluding that the animal was probably more familiar with the country than she. She found her self wondering why she had not thought of that before—when, for example, a few miles back she had deliberately guided it out of a beaten trail toward a section of country where, she had imagined, the traveling would be better. No doubt she had strayed from the trail just there.

The drops of rain grew more frequent; they splashed into her face; she could feel

them striking her arms and shoulders. The pony's neck and mane became moist under her hand, the darkness increased for a time and the continuing rumble in the heavens presaged a steady downpour.

The pony moved faster now; it needed no urging, and Sheila held her breath for fear that it might fall, straining her eyes to watch its limbs as they moved with the sure regularity of an automaton. After a time they reached the end of the level; Sheila could tell that the pony was negotiating another rise, for it slackened speed appreciably and she felt herself settling back against the cantle of the saddle. A little later she realized that they were going down the opposite side of the rise, and a moment later they were again on a level. A deeper blackness than they had yet encountered rose on their right, and Sheila correctly decided it to be caused by a stretch of wood that she had observed from the crest of the rise where she had halted her pony for a view of the country. After an interval, during which she debated the wisdom of directing her pony into the wood for protection from the rain which

18 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

was now coming against her face in vicious slants, her pony nickered shrilly!

A thrill of fear assailed Sheila. She knew horses and was certain that some living thing was on the trail in front of her. Halting the pony, she held tightly to the reins through a short, tense silence. Then presently, from a point just ahead on the trail, came an answering nicker in the horse language. Sheila's pony cavorted nervously and broke into a lope, sharper this time in spite of the tight rein she kept on it. Her fear grew, though mingling with it was a devout hope. If only the animal which had answered her own pony belonged to the Double R! She would take back many of the unkind and uncharitable things she had said about the country since she had lost the trail.

The pony's gait had quickened into a gallop—which she could not check. In the past few minutes the darkness had lifted a little; she saw that the pony was making a gradual turn, following a bend in the river. Then came a flash of lightning and she saw, a short distance ahead, a pony and rider, sta-

tionary, watching. With an effort she succeeded in reining in her own animal, and while she sat in the saddle, trembling and anxious, there came another flash of lightning and she saw the rider's face.

The rider was a cowboy. She had distinctly seen the leathern chaps on his legs; the broad hat, the scarf at his throat. Doubt and fear assailed her. What if the man did not belong to the Double R? What if he were a road agent—an outlaw? Immediately she heard an exclamation from him in which she detected much surprise and not a little amusement.

“Shucks!” he said. “It’s a woman!”

There came a slow movement. In the lifting darkness Sheila saw the man return a pistol to the holster that swung at his right hip. He carelessly threw one leg over the pommel of his saddle and looked at her. She sat very rigid, debating a sudden impulse to urge her pony past him and escape the danger that seemed to threaten. While she watched he shoved the broad brimmed hat back from his forehead. He was not over five feet distant from her; she could feel her

20 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

pony nuzzling his with an inquisitive muzzle, and she could dimly see the rider's face. It belonged to a man of probably twenty-eight or thirty; it had regular features, keen, level eyes and a firm mouth. There was a slight smile on his face and somehow the fear that had oppressed Sheila began to take flight. And while she sat awaiting the turn of events his voice again startled her:

"I reckon you've stampeded off your range, ma'am?"

A sigh of relief escaped Sheila. The voice was very gentle and friendly.

"I don't think that I have stampeded—whatever that means," she returned, reassured now that the stranger gave promise of being none of the dire figures of her imagination; "I am lost merely. You see, I am looking for the Double R ranch."

"Oh," he said inexpressively; "the Double R."

There ensued a short silence and she could not see his face for he had bowed his head a little and the broad brimmed hat intervened.

"Do you know where the Double R ranch

is?" There was a slight impatience in her voice.

"Sure," came his voice. "It's up the crick a ways."

"How far?"

"Twenty miles."

"Oh!" This information was disheartening. Twenty miles! And the rain was coming steadily down; she could feel it soaking through her clothing. A bitter, unreasoning anger against nature, against the circumstances which had conspired to place her in this position; against the man for his apparent lack of interest in her welfare, moved her, though she might have left the man out of it, for certainly he could not be held responsible. Yet his nonchalance, his serenity—something about him—irritated her. Didn't he know she was getting wet? Why didn't he offer her shelter? It did not occur to her that perhaps he knew of no shelter. But while her indignation over his inaction grew she saw that he was doing something—fumbling at a bundle that seemed to be strapped to the cantle of his saddle. And then he leaned forward—very close to her—

22 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

and she saw that he was offering her a tarpaulin.

"Wrap yourself in this," he directed. "It ain't pretty, of course, but it'll keep you from getting drenched. Rain ain't no respecter of persons."

She detected a compliment in this but ignored it and placed the tarpaulin around her shoulders. Then it suddenly occurred to her that he was without protection. She hesitated.

"Thank you," she said, "but I can't take this. You haven't anything for yourself."

A careless laugh reached her. "That's all right; I don't need anything."

There was silence again. He broke it with a question.

"What are you figuring to do now?"

What was she going to do? The prospect of a twenty-mile ride through a strange country in a drenching rain was far from appealing to her. Her hesitation was eloquent.

"I do not know," she answered, no way of escape from the dilemma presenting itself.

A WOMAN ON THE TRAIL 23

"You can go on, of course," he said, "and get lost, or hurt—or killed. It's a bad trail. Or"—he continued, hesitating a little and appearing to speak with an effort—there's my shack. You can have that."

Then he did have a dwelling place. This voluntary information removed another of the fearsome doubts that had beset her. She had been afraid that he might prove to be an irresponsible wanderer, but when a man kept a house it gave to his character a certain recommendation, it suggested stability, more, it indicated honesty.

Of course she would have to accept the shelter of his "shack." There was no help for it, for it was impossible for her to entertain the idea of riding twenty miles over an unknown trail, through the rain and darkness. Moreover, she was not afraid of the stranger now, for in spite of his easy, serene movements, his quiet composure, his suppressed amusement, Sheila detected a note in his voice which told her that he was deeply concerned over her welfare—even though he seemed to be enjoying her. In any event she could not go forward, for the unknown

24 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

terrified her and she felt that in accepting the proffered shelter of his "shack" she was choosing the lesser of two dangers. She decided quickly.

"I shall accept—I think. Will you please hurry? I am getting wet in spite of this—this covering."

Wheeling without a word he proceeded down the trail, following the river. The darkness had abated somewhat, the low-hanging clouds had taken on a grayish-white hue, and the rain was coming down in torrents. Sheila pulled the tarpaulin tighter about her shoulders and clung desperately to the saddle, listening to the whining of the wind through the trees that flanked her, keeping a watchful eye on the tall, swaying, indistinct figure of her guide.

After riding for a quarter of an hour they reached a little clearing near the river and Sheila saw her guide halt his pony and dismount. A squat, black shape loomed out of the darkness near her and, riding closer, she saw a small cabin, of the lean-to type, constructed of adobe bricks. A dog barked in front of her and she heard the stranger

speaking sharply to it. He silently approached and helped her down from the saddle. Then he led both horses away into the darkness on the other side of the cabin. During his absence she found time to glance about her. It was a desolate place. Did he live here alone?

The silence brought no answer to this question, and while she continued to search out objects in the darkness she saw the stranger reappear around the corner of the cabin and approach the door. He fumbled at it for a moment and threw it open. He disappeared within and an instant later Sheila heard the scratch of a match and saw a feeble glimmer of light shoot out through the doorway. Then the stranger's voice:

"Come in."

He had lighted a candle that stood on a table in the center of the room, and in its glaring flicker as she stepped inside Sheila caught her first good view of the stranger's face. She felt reassured instantly, for it was a good face, with lines denoting strength of character. The drooping mustache did not quite conceal his lips, which were straight

26 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

and firm. Sheila was a little disturbed over the hard expression in them, however, though she had heard that the men of the West lived rather hazardous lives and she supposed that in time their faces showed it. It was his eyes, though, that gave her a fleeting glimpse of his character. They were blue—a steely, fathomless blue; baffling, mocking; swimming—as she looked into them now—with an expression that she could not attempt to analyze. One thing she saw in them only,—recklessness—and she drew a slow, deep breath.

They were standing very close together. He caught the deep-drawn breath and looked quickly at her, his eyes alight and narrowed with an expression which was a curious mingling of quizzical humor and grim enjoyment. Her own eyes did not waver, though his were boring into hers steadily, as though he were trying to read her thoughts.

“Afraid?” he questioned, with a suggestion of sarcasm in the curl of his lips.

Sheila stiffened, her eyes flashing defiance. She studied him steadily, her spirit battling

his over the few feet that separated them. Then she spoke deliberately, evenly: "I am not afraid of you!"

"That's right." A gratified smile broke on the straight, hard lips. A new expression came into his eyes—admiration. "You've got nerve, ma'am. I'm some pleased that you've got that much trust in me. You don't need to be scared. You're as safe here as you'd be out there." He nodded toward the open door. "Safer," he added with a grave smile; "you might get hurt out there."

He turned abruptly and went to the door, where he stood for a long time looking out into the darkness. She watched him for a moment and then removed the tarpaulin and hung it from a nail in the wall of the cabin. Standing near the table she glanced about her. There was only one room in the cabin, but it was large—about twenty by twenty, she estimated. Beside an open fireplace in a corner were several pots and pans—his cooking utensils. On a shelf were some dishes. A guitar swung from a gaudy string suspended from the wall. A tin of tobacco and a pipe

28 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

reposed on another shelf beside a box of matches. A bunk filled a corner and she went over to it, fearing. But it was clean and the bed clothing fresh and she smiled a little as she continued her examination.

The latter finished she went to a small window above the bunk, looking out into the night. The rain came against the glass in stinging slants, and watching it she found herself feeling very grateful to the man who stood in the doorway. Turning abruptly, she caught him watching her, an appraising smile on his face.

“You ought to be hungry by now,” he said. “There’s a fireplace and some wood. Do you want a fire?”

In response to her nod he kindled a fire, she standing beside the window watching him, noting his lithe, easy movements. She could not mistake the strength and virility of his figure, even with his back turned to her, but it seemed to her that there was a certain recklessness in his actions—as though his every movement advertised a careless regard for consequences. She held her breath when he split a short log into slender splin-

ters, for he swung the short-handled axe with a loose grasp, as though he cared very little where its sharp blade landed. But she noted that he struck with precision despite his apparent carelessness, every blow falling true. His manner of handling the axe reflected the spirit that shone in his eyes when, after kindling the fire, he stood up and looked at her.

"There's grub in the chuck box," he stated shortly. "There's some pans and things. It ain't what you might call elegant—not what you've been used to, I expect. But it's a heap better than nothing, and I reckon you'll be able to get along." He turned and walked to the doorway, standing in it for an instant, facing out. "Good-night," he added. The tarpaulin dangled from his arm.

Evidently he intended going away. A sudden dread of being alone filled her. "Wait!" she cried involuntarily. "Where are you going?"

He halted and looked back at her, an odd smile on his face.

"To my bunk."

30 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

"Oh!" She could not analyze the smile on his face, but in it she thought she detected something subtle—untruthfulness perhaps. She glanced at the tarpaulin and from it to his eyes, holding her gaze steadily.

"You are going to sleep in the open," she said.

He caught the accusation in her eyes and his face reddened.

"Well," he admitted, "I've done it before."

"Perhaps," she said, a little doubtfully. "But I do not care to feel that I am driving you out into the storm. You might catch cold and die. And I should not want to think that I was responsible for your death."

"A little wetting wouldn't hurt me." He looked at her appraisingly, a glint of sympathy in his eyes. Standing there, framed in the darkness, the flickering light from the candle on his strong, grave face, he made a picture that, she felt, she would not soon forget.

"I reckon you ain't afraid to stay here alone, ma'am," he said.

"Yes," she returned frankly, "I am

afraid. I do not want to stay here alone."

A pistol flashed in his hand, its butt toward her, and now for the first time she saw another at his hip. She repressed a desire to shudder and stared with dilated eyes at the extended weapon.

"Take this gun," he offered. "It ain't much for looks, but it'll go right handy. You can bar the door, too, and the window."

She refused to take the weapon. "I wouldn't know how to use it if I had occasion to. I prefer to have you remain in the cabin—for protection."

He bowed. "I thought you'd—" he began, and then smiled wryly. "It certainly would be some wet outside," he admitted. "It wouldn't be pleasant sleeping. I'll lay over here by the door when I get my blankets."

He went outside and in a few minutes reappeared with his blankets and saddle. Without speaking a word to Sheila he laid the saddle down, spread the blanket over it, and stretched himself out on his back.

"I don't know about the light," he said after an interval of silence, during which

32 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

Sheila sat on the edge of the bunk and regarded his profile appraisingly. You can blow it out if you like."

"I prefer to have it burning."

"Suit yourself."

Sheila got up and placed the candle in a tin dish as a precaution against fire. Then, when its position satisfied her she left the table and went to the bunk, stretching herself out on it, fully dressed.

For a long time she lay, listening to the soft patter of the rain on the roof, looking upward at the drops that splashed against the window, listening to the fitful whining of the wind through the trees near the cabin. Her eyes closed presently, sleep was fast claiming her. Then she heard her host's voice:

"You're from the East, I reckon."

"Yes,"

"Where?"

"New York."

"City?"

"Albany."

There was a silence. Sheila was thoroughly awake again, and once more her gaze

went to the window, where unceasing streams trickled down the glass. Whatever fear she had had of the owner of the cabin had long ago been dispelled by his manner which, though puzzling, hinted of the gentleman. She would have liked him better were it not for the reckless gleam in his eyes; that gleam, it seemed to her, indicated a trait of character which was not wholly admirable.

“What have you come out here for?”

Sheila smiled at the rain-spattered window, a flash of pleased vanity in her eyes. His voice had been low, but in it she detected much curiosity, even interest. It was not surprising, of course, that he should feel an interest in her; other men had been interested in her too, only they had not been men that lived in romantic wildernesses,—observe that she did not make use of the term “unfeatured,” which she had manufactured soon after realizing that she was lost—nor had they carried big revolvers, like this man, who seemed also to know very well how to use them.

Those other men who had been interested

34 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

in her had had a way of looking at her; there had always been a significant boldness in their eyes which belied the gentleness of demeanor which, she had always been sure, merely masked their real characters. She had never been able to look squarely at any of those men, the men of her circle who had danced attendance upon her at the social functions that had formerly filled her existence—without a feeling of repugnance.

They had worn man-shapes, of course, but somehow they had seemed to lack something real and vital; seemed to have possessed nothing of that forceful, magnetic personality which was needed to arouse her sympathy and interest. Not that the man on the floor in front of the door interested her—she could not admit that! But she had felt a sympathy for him in his loneliness, and she had looked into his eyes—had been able to look steadily into them, and though she had seen expressions that had puzzled her, she had at least seen nothing to cause her to feel any uneasiness. She had seen manliness there, and indomitability, and force, and it had seemed to her to be suffi-

cient. His would be an ideal face were it not for the expression that lingered about the lips, were it not for the reckless glint in his eyes—a glint that revealed an untamed spirit.

His question remained unanswered. He stirred impatiently, and glancing at him Sheila saw that he had raised himself so that his chin rested in his hand, his elbow supported by the saddle.

“You here for a visit?” he questioned.

“Perhaps,” she said. “I do not know how long I shall stay. My father has bought the Double R.”

For a long time it seemed that he would have no comment to make on this and Sheila’s lips took on a decidedly petulant expression. Apparently he was not interested in her after all.

“Then Duncan has sold out?” There was satisfaction in his voice.

“You are keen,” she mocked.

“And tickled,” he added.

His short laugh brought a sudden interest into her eyes. “Then you don’t like Duncan,” she said.

36 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

"I reckon you're some keen too," came the mocking response.

Sheila flushed, turned and looked defiantly at him. His hand still supported his head and there was an unmistakable interest in his eyes as he caught her glance at him and smiled.

"You got any objections to telling me your name? We ain't been introduced, you know?" he said.

"It is Sheila Langford."

She had turned her head and was giving her attention to the window above her. The fingers of the hand that had been supporting his head slowly clenched, he raised himself slightly, his body rigid, his chin thrusting, his face pale, his eyes burning with a sudden fierce fire. Once he opened his lips to speak, but instantly closed them again, and a smile wreathed them—a mirthless smile that had in it a certain cold caution and cunning. After a silence that lasted long his voice came again, drawling, well-controlled, revealing nothing of the emotion which had previously affected him.

"What is your father's name?"

"David Dowd Langford. An uncommon middle name, isn't it?"

"Yes. Uncommon," came his reply. His face, with the light of the candle gleaming full upon it, bore a queer pallor—the white of cold ashes. His right hand, which had been resting carelessly on the blanket, was now gripping it, the muscles tense and knotted. Yet after another long silence his voice came again—drawling, well-controlled, as before:

"What is he coming out here for?"

"He has retired from business and is coming out here for his health."

"What business was he in?"

"Wholesale hardware."

He was silent again and presently, hearing him stir, Sheila looked covertly at him. He had turned, his back was toward her, and he was stretched out on the blanket as though, fully satisfied with the result of his questioning, he intended going to sleep. For several minutes Sheila watched him with a growing curiosity. It was like a man to ask all and give nothing. He had questioned her to his complete satisfaction but had told

38 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

nothing of himself. She was determined to discover something about him.

"Who are you?" she questioned.

"Dakota," he said shortly.

"Dakota?" she repeated, puzzled. "That isn't a name; it's a State—or a Territory."

"I'm Dakota. Ask anybody." There was a decided drawl in his voice.

This information was far from being satisfactory, but she supposed it must answer. Still, she persisted. "Where are you from?"

"Dakota."

That seemed to end it. It had been a short quest and an unsatisfactory one. It was perfectly plain to her that he was some sort of a rancher—at the least a cowboy. It was also plain that he had been a cowboy before coming to this section of the country—probably in Dakota. She was perplexed and vexed and nibbled impatiently at her lips.

"Dakota isn't your real name," she declared sharply.

"Ain't it?" There came the drawl again. It irritated her this time.

A WOMAN ON THE TRAIL 39

"No!" she snapped.

"Well, it's as good as any other. Good-night."

Sheila did not answer. Five minutes later she was asleep.

CHAPTER II

THE DIM TRAIL

SHEILA had been dreaming of a world in which there was nothing but rain and mud and clouds and reckless-eyed individuals who conversed in irritating drawls when a sharp crash of thunder awakened her. During her sleep she had turned her face to the wall, and when her eyes opened the first thing that her gaze rested on was the small window above her head. She regarded it for some time, following with her eyes the erratic streams that trickled down the glass, stretching out wearily, listening to the wind. It was cold and bleak outside and she had much to be thankful for.

She was glad that she had not allowed the mysterious inhabitant of the cabin to sleep out in his tarpaulin, for the howling of the wind brought weird thoughts into her mind;

she reflected upon her helplessness and it was extremely satisfying to know that within ten feet of her lay a man whose two big revolvers—even though she feared them—seemed to insure protection. It was odd, she told herself, that she should place so much confidence in Dakota, and her presence in the cabin with him was certainly a breach of propriety which—were her friends in the East to hear of it—would arouse much comment—entirely unfavorable to her. Yes, it was odd, yet considering Dakota, she was not in the least disturbed. So far his conduct toward her had been that of the perfect gentleman, and in spite of the recklessness that gleamed in his eyes whenever he looked at her she was certain that he would continue to be a gentleman.

It was restful to lie and listen to the rain splashing on the roof and against the window, but sleep, for some unaccountable reason, seemed to grow farther from her—the recollection of events during the past few hours left no room in her thoughts for sleep. Turning, after a while, to seek a more comfortable position, she saw Dakota sitting at

42 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

the table, on the side opposite her, watching her intently.

"Can't sleep, eh?" he said, when he saw her looking at him. "Storm bother you?"

"I think it was the thunder that awakened me," she returned. "Thunder always does. Evidently it disturbs you too."

"I haven't been asleep," he said in a curt tone.

He continued to watch her with a quiet, appraising gaze. It was evident that he had been thinking of her when she had turned to look at him. She flushed with embarrassment over the thought that while she had been asleep he must have been considering her, and yet, looking closely at him now, she decided that his expression was frankly impersonal.

He glanced at his watch. "You've been asleep two hours," he said. "I've been watching you—and envying you."

"Envyng me? Why? Are you troubled with insomnia?"

He laughed. "Nothing so serious as that. It's just thoughts."

"Pleasant ones, of course."

"You might call them pleasant. I've been thinking of you."

Sheila found no reply to make to this, but blushed again.

"Thinking of you," repeated Dakota. "Of the chance you took in coming out here alone—in coming into my shack. We're twenty miles from town here—twenty miles from the Double R—the nearest ranch. It isn't likely that a soul will pass here for a month. Suppose——"

"We won't 'suppose,' if you please," said Sheila. Her face had grown slowly pale, but there was a confident smile on her lips as she looked at him.

"No?" he said, watching her steadily. "Why? Isn't it quite possible that you could have fallen in with a sort of man——"

"As it happens, I did not," interrupted Sheila.

"How do you know?"

Sheila's gaze met his unwaveringly. "Because you are the man," she said slowly.

She thought she saw a glint of pleasure in his eyes, but was not quite certain, for his expression changed instantly.

44 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

"Fate, or Providence—or whatever you are pleased to call the power that shuffles us flesh and blood mannikins around—has a way of putting us all in the right places. I expect that's one of the reasons why you didn't fall in with the sort of man I was going to tell you about," said Dakota.

"I don't see what Fate has to do—" began Sheila, wondering at his serious tone.

"Odd, isn't it?" he drawled.

"What is odd?"

"That you don't see. But lots of people don't see. They're chucked and shoved around like men on a chess board, and though they're always interested they don't usually know what it's all about. Just as well too—usually."

"I don't see——"

He smiled mysteriously. "Did I say that I expected you to see?" he said. "There isn't anything personal in this, aside from the fact that I was trying to show you that some one was foolish in sending you out here alone. Some day you'll look back on your visit here and then you'll understand."

He got up and walked to the door, open-

ing it and standing there looking out into the darkness. Shelia watched him, puzzled by his mysterious manner, though not in the least afraid of him. Several times while he stood at the door he turned and looked at her and presently, when a gust of wind rushed in and Sheila shivered, he abruptly closed the door, barred it, and strode to the fireplace, throwing a fresh log into it. For a time he stood silently in front of the fire, his figure casting a long, gaunt shadow at Sheila's feet, his gaze on her, grim, somber lines in his face. Presently he cleared his throat.

"How old are you?" he said shortly.

"Twenty-two."

"And you've lived East all your life. Lived well, too, I suppose—plenty of money, luxuries, happiness?"

He caught her nod and continued, his lips curling a little. "Your father too, I reckon—has he been happy?"

"I think so."

"That's odd." He had spoken more to himself than to Sheila and he looked at her with narrowed eyes when she answered.

46 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

"What is odd? That my father should be happy—that I should?"

"Odd that anyone who is happy in one place should want to leave that place and go to another. Maybe the place he went to wouldn't be just right for him. What makes people want to move around like that?"

"Perhaps you could answer that yourself," suggested Sheila. "I am sure that you haven't lived here in this part of the country all your life."

"How do you know that?" His gaze was quizzical and mocking.

"I don't know. But you haven't."

"Well," he said we'll say I haven't. But I wasn't happy where I came from and I came here looking for happiness—and something else. That I didn't find what I was looking for isn't the question—mostly none of us find the things we're looking for. But if I had been happy where I was I wouldn't have come here. You say your father has been happy there; that he's got plenty of money and all that. Then why should he want to live here?"

"I believe I told you that he is coming here for his health."

His eyes lighted savagely. But Sheila did not catch their expression for at that moment she was looking at his shadow on the floor. How long, how grotesque, it seemed, and forbidding—like its owner.

"So he's got everything he wants but his health. What made him lose that?"

"How should I know?"

"Just lost it, I reckon," said Dakota subtly. "Cares and Worry?"

"I presume. His health has been failing for about ten years."

Sheila was looking straight at Dakota now and she saw his face whiten, his lips harden. And when he spoke again there was a chill in his voice and a distinct pause between his words.

"Ten years," he said. "That's a long time, isn't it? A long time for a man who has been losing his health. And yet—" There was a mirthless smile on Dakota's face—"ten years is a longer time for a man in good health who hasn't been happy. Couldn't your father have doctored—gone

48 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

abroad—to recover his health? Or was his a mental sickness?”

“Mental, I think. He worried quite a little.”

Dakota turned from her, but not quickly enough to conceal the light of savage joy that flashed suddenly into his eyes.

“Why!” exclaimed Sheila, voicing her surprise at the startling change in his manner; “that seems to please you!”

“It does.” He laughed oddly. “It pleases me to find that I’m to have a neighbor who is afflicted with the sort of sickness that has been bothering me for—for a good many years.”

There was a silence, during which Sheila yawned and Dakota stood motionless, looking straight ahead.

“You like your father, I reckon?” came his voice presently, as his gaze went to her again.

“Of course.” She looked up at him in surprise. “Why shouldn’t I like him?”

“Of course you like him. Mostly children like their fathers.”

“Children!” She glared scornfully at

him. "I am twenty-two! I told you that before!"

"So you did," he returned, unruffled. "When is he coming out here?"

"In a month—a month from to-day." She regarded him with a sudden, new interest. "You are betraying a great deal of curiosity," she accused. "Why?"

"Why," he answered slowly, "I reckon that isn't odd, is it? He's going to be my neighbor, isn't he?"

"Oh!" she said with emphasis of mockery which equalled his. "And you are gossiping about your neighbor even before he comes."

"Like a woman," he said with a smile.

"An impertinent one," she retorted.

"Your father," he said in accents of sarcasm, ignoring the jibe, "seems to think a heap of you—sending you all the way out here alone."

"I came against his wish; he wanted me to wait and come with him."

Her defense of her parent seemed to amuse him. He smiled mysteriously. "Then he likes you?"

"Is that strange? He hasn't any one else—no relative. I am the only one."

"You're the only one." He repeated her words slowly, regarding her narrowly. "And he likes you. I reckon he'd be hurt quite a little if you had fallen in with the sort of man I was going to tell you about."

"Naturally." Sheila was tapping with her booted foot on his shadow on the floor and did not look at him.

"It's a curious thing," he said slowly, after an interval, "that a man who has got a treasure grows careless of it in time. It's natural, too. But I reckon fate has something to do with it. Ten chances to one if nothing happens to you your father will consider himself lucky. But suppose you had happened to fall in with a different man than me—we'll say, for instance, a man who had a grudge against your father—and that man didn't have that uncommon quality called 'mercy.' What then? Ten chances to one your father would say it was fate that had led you to him."

"I think," she said scornfully, "that you

are talking silly! In the first place, I don't believe my father thinks that I am a treasure, though he likes me very much. In the second place, if he does think that I am a treasure, he is very much mistaken, for I am not—I am a woman and quite able to take care of myself. You have exhibited a wonderful curiosity over my father and me, and though it has all been mystifying and entertaining, I don't purpose to talk to you all night."

"I didn't waken you," he mocked.

Sheila swung around on the bunk, her back to him. "You are keeping me awake," she retorted.

"Well, good night then," he laughed, "Miss Sheila."

"Good night, Mr.—Mr. Dakota," she returned.

Sheila did not hear him again. Her thoughts dwelt for a little time on him and his mysterious manner, then they strayed. They returned presently and she concentrated her attention on the rain; she could hear the soft, steady patter of it on the roof;

52 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

she listened to it trickling from the eaves and striking the glass in the window above her head. Gradually the soft patter seemed to draw farther away, became faint, and more faint, and finally she heard it no more.

CHAPTER III

CONVERGING TRAILS

IT was the barking of a dog that brought Sheila out of a sleep—dreamless this time—into a state of semi-consciousness. It was Dakota's dog surely, she decided sleepily. She sighed and twisted to a more comfortable position. The effort awakened her and she opened her eyes, her gaze resting immediately on Dakota. He still sat at the table, silent, immovable, as before. But now he was sitting erect, his muscles tensed, his chin thrust out aggressively, his gaze on the door—listening. He seemed to be unaware of Sheila's presence; the sound that she had made in turning he apparently had not heard.

There was an interval of silence and then came a knocking on the door—loud, unmistakable. Some one desired admittance. After the knock came a voice:

54 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

"Hello inside!"

"Hello yourself!" Dakota's voice came with a truculent snap. "What's up?"

"Lookin' for a dry place," came the voice from without. "Mebbe you don't know it's wet out here!"

Sheila's gaze was riveted on Dakota. He arose and noiselessly moved his chair back from the table and she saw a saturnine smile on his face, yet in his eyes there shone a glint of intolerance that mingled oddly with his gravity.

"You alone?" he questioned, his gaze on the door.

"Yes."

"Who are you?"

"Campbellite preacher."

For the first time since she had been awake Dakota turned and looked at Sheila. The expression of his face puzzled her. "A parson!" he sneered in a low voice. "I reckon we'll have some praying now." He took a step forward, hesitated, and looked back at Sheila. "Do you want him in here?"

Sheila's nod brought a whimsical, shallow

smile to his face. "Of course you do—you're lonesome in here." There was mockery in his voice. He deliberately drew out his two guns, examined them minutely, returned one to his holster, retaining the other in his right hand. With a cold grin at Sheila he snuffed out the candle between a finger and a thumb and strode to the door—Sheila could hear him fumbling at the fastenings. He spoke to the man outside sharply.

"Come in!"

There was a movement; a square of light appeared in the wall of darkness; there came a step on the threshold. Watching, Sheila saw, framed in the open doorway, the dim outlines of a figure—a man.

"Stand right there," came Dakota's voice from somewhere in the impenetrable darkness of the interior, and Sheila wondered at the hospitality that greeted a stranger with total darkness and a revolver. "Light a match."

After a short interval of silence there came the sound of a match scratching on the wall, and a light flared up, showing

56 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

Sheila the face of a man of sixty, bronzed, bearded, with gentle, quizzical eyes.

The light died down, the man waited. Sheila had forgotten—in her desire to see the face of the visitor—to look for Dakota, but presently she heard his voice:

“I reckon you’re a parson, all right. Close the door.”

The parson obeyed the command. “Light the candle on the table!” came the order from Dakota. “I’m not taking any chances until I get a better look at you.”

Another match flared up and the parson advanced to the table and lighted the candle. He smiled while applying the match to the wick. “Don’t pay to take no chances—on anything,” he agreed. He stood erect, a tall man, rugged and active for his sixty years, and threw off a rain-soaked tarpaulin. Some traces of dampness were visible on his clothing, but in the circumstances he had not fared so badly.

“It’s a new trail to me—I don’t know the country,” he went on. “If I hadn’t seen your light I reckon I’d have been goin’ yet. I was thinkin’ that it was mighty queer that

you'd have a light goin' so——" He stopped short, seeing Sheila sitting on the bunk. "Shucks, ma'am," he apologized, "I didn't know you were there." His hat came off and dangled in his left hand; with the other he brushed back the hair from his forehead, smiling meanwhile at Sheila.

"Why, ma'am," he said apologetically, "if your husband had told me you was here I'd have gone right on an' not bothered you."

Sheila's gaze went from the parson's face and sought Dakota's, a crimson flood spreading over her face and temples. A slow, amused gleam filled Dakota's eyes. But plainly he did not intend to set the parson right—he was enjoying Sheila's confusion. The color fled from her face as suddenly as it had come and was succeeded by the pallor of a cold indignation.

"I'm not married," she said instantly to the parson; "this gentleman is not my husband."

"Not?" questioned the parson. "Then how—" He hesitated and looked quickly at Dakota, but the latter was watching

58 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

Sheila with an odd smile and the parson looked puzzled.

"This is my first day in this country," explained Sheila.

The parson did not reply to this, though he continued to watch her intently. She met his gaze steadily and he smiled. "I reckon you've been caught on the trail too," he said, "by the storm."

Sheila nodded.

"Well, it's been right wet to-night, an' it ain't no night to be galivantin 'around the country. Where you goin' to?"

"To the Double R ranch."

"Where's the Double R?" asked the parson.

"West," Dakota answered for Sheila; "twenty miles."

"Off my trail," said the parson. "I'm travelin' to Lazette." He laughed, shortly. "I'm askin' your pardon, ma'am, for takin' you to be married; you don't look like you belonged here—I ought to have knowed that right off."

Sheila told him that he was forgiven and he had no comment to make on this, but

looked at her appraisingly. He drew a bench up near the fire and sat looking at the licking flames, the heat drawing the steam from his clothing as the latter dried. Dakota supplied him with soda biscuit and cold bacon, and these he munched in contentment, talking meanwhile of his travels. Several times while he sat before the fire Dakota spoke to him, and finally he pulled his chair over near the wall opposite the bunk on which Sheila sat, tilted it back, and dropped into it, stretching out comfortably.

After seating himself, Dakota's gaze sought Sheila. It was evident to Sheila that he was thinking pleasant thoughts, for several times she looked quickly at him to catch him smiling. Once she met his gaze fairly and was certain that she saw a crafty, calculating gleam in his eyes. She was puzzled, though there was nothing of fear from Dakota now; the presence of the parson in the cabin assured her of safety.

A half hour dragged by. The parson did not appear to be sleepy. Sheila glanced at her watch and saw that it was midnight. She wondered much at the parson's wake-

60 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

fulness and her own weariness. But she could safely go to sleep now, she told herself, and she stretched noiselessly out on the bunk and with one arm bent under her head listened to the parson.

Evidently the parson was itinerant; he spoke of many places—Wyoming, Colorado, Nevada, Arizona, Texas; of towns in New Mexico. To Sheila, her senses dulled by the drowsiness that was stealing over her, it appeared that the parson was a foe to Science. His volubility filled the cabin; he contended sonorously that the earth was not round. The Scriptures, he maintained, held otherwise. He called Dakota's attention to the seventh chapter of Revelation, verse one:

“And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree.”

Several times Sheila heard Dakota laugh, mockingly; he was skeptical, caustic even, and he took issue with the parson. Between them they managed to prevent her

falling asleep; kept her in a semidoze which was very near to complete wakefulness.

After a time, though, the argument grew monotonous; the droning of their voices seemed gradually to grow distant; Sheila lost interest in the conversation and sank deeper into her doze. How long she had been unconscious of them she did not know, but presently she was awake again and listening. Dakota's laugh had awakened her. Out of the corners of her eyes she saw that he was still seated in the chair beside the wall and that his eyes were alight with interest as he watched the parson.

"So you're going to Lazette, taking it on to him?"

The parson nodded, smiling. "When a man wants to get married he'll not care much about the arrangements—how it gets done. What he wants to do is to get married."

"That's a queer angle," Dakota observed. He laughed immoderately.

The parson laughed with him. It *was* an odd situation, he agreed. Never, in all his experience, had he heard of anything like it.

62 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

He had stopped for a few hours at Dry Bottom. While there a rider had passed through, carrying word that a certain man in Lazette, called "Baldy," desired to get married. There was no minister in Lazette, not even a justice of the peace. But Baldy wanted to be married, and his bride-to-be objected to making the trip to Dry Bottom, where there were both a parson and a justice of the peace. Therefore, failing to induce the lady to go to the parson, it followed that Baldy must contrive to have the parson come to the lady. He dispatched the rider to Dry Bottom on this quest.

The rider had found that there was no regular parson in Dry Bottom and that the justice of the peace had departed the day before to some distant town for a visit. Luckily for Baldy's matrimonial plans, the parson had been in Dry Bottom when the rider arrived, and he readily consented—as he intended to pass through Lazette anyway—to carry Baldy's license to him and perform the ceremony.

"Odd, ain't it?" remarked the parson, after he had concluded.

"That's a queer angle," repeated Dakota. "You got the license?" he inquired softly. "Mebbe you've lost it."

"I reckon not." The parson fumbled in a pocket, drawing out a folded paper. "I've got it, right enough."

"You've got no objections to me looking at it?" came Dakota's voice. Sheila saw him rise. There was a strange smile on his face.

"No objections. I reckon you'll be usin' one yourself one of these days."

"One of these days," echoed Dakota with a laugh as strange as his smile a moment before. "Yes—I'm thinking of using one one of these days."

The parson spread the paper out on the table. Together he and Dakota bent their heads over it. After reading the license Dakota stood erect. He laughed, looking at the parson.

"There ain't a name on it," he said, "not a name."

"They're reckonin' to fill in the names when they're married," explained the parson. "That there rider ought to have

64 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

knowed the names, but he didn't. Only knowed that the man was called 'Baldy.' Didn't know the bride's name at all. But it don't make any difference; they wouldn't have had to have a license at all in this Territory. But it makes it look more regular when they've got one. All that's got to be done is for Baldy to go over to Dry Bottom an' have the names recorded. Bein' as I can't go, I'm to certify in the license."

"Sure," said Dakota slowly. "It makes things more regular to have a license—more regular to have you certify."

Looking at Dakota, Sheila thought she saw in his face a certain preoccupation; he was evidently not thinking of what he was saying at all; the words had come involuntarily, automatically almost, it seemed, so inexpressive were they. "Sure," he repeated, "you're to certify, in the license."

It was as though he were reading aloud from a printed page, his thoughts elsewhere, and seeing only the words and uttering them unconsciously. Some idea had formed in his brain, he meditated some surprising action. That she was concerned in his thoughts

Sheila did not doubt, for he presently turned and looked straight at her and in his eyes she saw a new expression—a cold, designing gleam that frightened her.

Five minutes later, when the parson announced his intention to care for his horse before retiring and stood in the doorway preparatory to going out, Sheila restrained an impulse to call to him to remain. She succeeded in quieting her fears, however, by assuring herself that nothing could happen now, with the parson so near. Thus fortified, she smiled at Dakota as the parson stepped down and closed the door.

She drew a startled breath in the next instant, though, for without noticing her smile Dakota stepped to the door and barred it. Turning, he stood with his back against it, his lips in straight, hard lines, his eyes steady and gleaming brightly.

He caught Sheila's gaze and held it; she trembled and sat erect.

"It's odd, ain't it?" he said, in the mocking voice that he had used when using the same words earlier in the evening.

"What is odd?" Hers was the same

answer that she had used before, too—she could think of nothing else to say.

“Odd that he should come along just at this time.” He indicated the door through which the parson had disappeared. “You and me are here, and he comes. Who sent him?”

“Chance, I suppose,” Sheila answered, though she could feel that there was a subtle undercurrent in his speech, and she felt again the strange unrest that had affected her several times before.

“You think it was chance,” he said, drawling his words. “Well, maybe that’s just as good a name for it as any other. But we don’t all see things the same way, do we? We couldn’t, of course, because we’ve all got different things to do. We think this is a big world and that we play a big game. But it’s a little world and a little game when Fate takes a hand in it. I told you a while ago that Fate had a queer way of shuffling us around. That’s a fact. And Fate is running this game.” His mocking laugh had a note of grimness in it, which brought a chill over Sheila. “Just now, Miss

Sheila, Fate is playing with brides and bridegrooms and marriages and parsons. That's what is so odd. Fate has supplied the parson and the license; we'll supply the names. Look at the bridegroom, Shelia," he directed, tapping his breast with a finger; "this is your wedding day!"

"What do you mean?" Sheila was on her feet, trembling, her face white with fear and dread.

"That we're to be married," he said, smiling at her, and she noted with a qualm that there was no mirth in the smile, "you and me. The parson will tie the knot."

"This is a joke, I suppose?" she said scornfully, attempting a lightness that she did not feel; "a crude one, to be sure, for you certainly cannot be serious."

"I was never more serious in my life," he said slowly. "We are to be married when the parson comes in."

"How do you purpose to accomplish this?" she jeered. "The parson certainly will not perform a marriage ceremony without the consent of—without my consent."

"I think," he said coldly, "that you will

68 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

consent. I am not in a trifling mood. Just now it pleases me to imagine that I am an instrument of Fate. Maybe that sounds mysterious to you, but some day you will be able to see just how logical it all seems to me now, that Fate has sent me a pawn—a subject, if you please—to sacrifice, that the game which I have been playing may be carried to its conclusion.”

Outside they heard the dog bark, heard the parson speak to it.

“The parson is coming,” said Sheila, her joy over the impending interruption showing in her eyes.

“Yes, he is coming.” Still with his back to the door, Dakota deliberately drew out one of his heavy pistols and examined it minutely, paying no attention to Sheila. Her eyes widened with fear as the hand holding the weapon dropped to his side and he looked at her again.

“What are you doing to do?” she demanded, watching these forbidding preparations with dilated eyes.

“That depends,” he returned with a chilling laugh. “Have you ever seen a

man die? No?" he continued as she shuddered. "Well, if you don't consent to marry me you will see the parson die. I have decided to give you the choice, ma'am," he went on in a quiet, determined voice, entirely free from emotion. "Sacrifice yourself and the parson lives; refuse and I shoot the parson down the instant he steps inside the door."

"Oh!" she cried in horror, taking a step toward him and looking into his eyes for evidence of insincerity—for the slightest sign that would tell her that he was merely trying to scare her. "Oh! you—you coward!" she cried, for she saw nothing in his eyes but cold resolution.

He smiled with straight lips. "You see," he mocked, "how odd it is? Fate is shuffling us three in this game. You have your choice. Do you care to be responsible for the death of a fellow being?"

For a tense instant she looked at him, and seeing the hard, inexorable glitter in his eyes she cringed away from him and sank to the edge of the bunk, covering her face with her hands.

70 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

During the silence that followed she could hear the parson outside—his voice, and the yelping of the dog—evidently they had formed a friendship. The sounds came nearer; Sheila heard the parson try the door. She became aware that Dakota was standing over her and she looked up, shivering, to see his face, still hard and unyielding.

"I am going to open the door," he said. "Is it you or the parson?"

At that word she was on her feet, standing before him, rigid with anger, her eyes flaming with scorn and hatred.

"You wouldn't dare to do it!" she said hoarsely; "you—you——" She snatched suddenly for the butt of the weapon that swung at his left hip, but with a quick motion he evaded the hand and stepped back a pace, smiling coldly.

"I reckon it's the parson," he said in a low voice, which carried an air of finality. He started for the door, hesitated, and came back to the bunk, standing in front of Sheila, looking down into her eyes.

"I am giving you one last chance," he told her. "I am going to open the door."

“If you want the parson to die, don’t look at me when he steps in. If you want him to live, turn your back to him and walk to the fireplace.”

He walked to the door, unlocked it, and stepped back, his gaze on Sheila. Then the door opened slowly and the parson stood on the threshold, smiling.

“It’s sure some wet outside,” he said.

Dakota was fingering the cylinder of his revolver, his gaze now riveted on the parson.

“Why,” said the latter, in surprise, seeing the attitudes of Dakota and his guest, “what in the name of——”

There came a movement, and Sheila stood in front of Dakota, between him and the parson. For an instant she stood, looking at Dakota with a scornful, loathing gaze. Then with a dry sob, which caught in her throat, she moved past him and went to the fireplace, where she stood looking down at the flames.

CHAPTER IV

THIS PICTURE AND THAT

IT was a scene of wild, virgin beauty upon which Sheila Langford looked as she sat on the edge of a grassy butte overlooking the Ute River, with Duncan, the Double R manager stretched out, full length beside her, a gigantic picture on Nature's canvas, glowing with colors which the gods had spread with a generous touch.

A hundred feet below Sheila and Duncan the waters of the river swept around the base of the butte, racing over a rocky bed toward a deep, narrow canyon farther down. Directly opposite the butte rose a short slope, forming the other bank of the river. From the crest of the slope began a plain that stretched for many miles, merging at the horizon into some pine-clad foothills. Behind the foothills were the mountains, their snow peaks shimmering in a white sky

THIS PICTURE AND THAT 73

—remote, mysterious, seeming like guardians of another world. The chill of the mountains contrasted sharply with the slumberous luxuriance and color of the plains.

Miles of grass, its green but slightly dulled with a thin covering of alkali dust, spread over the plain; here and there a grove of trees rose, it seemed, to break the monotony of space. To the right the river doubled sharply, the farther bank fringed with alder and aspen, their tall stalks nodding above the nondescript river weeds; the near bank a continuing wall of painted buttes—red, picturesque, ragged, thrusting upward and outward over the waters of the river. On the left was a stretch of broken country. Mammoth boulders were strewn here; weird rocks arose in inconceivably grotesque formations; lava beds, dull and gray, circled the bald knobs of some low hills. Above it all swam the sun, filling the world with a clear, white light. It made a picture whose beauty might have impressed the most unresponsive. Yet, though Sheila was looking upon the picture, her thoughts were dwelling upon another.

74 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

This other picture was not so beautiful, and a vague unrest gripped Sheila's heart as she reviewed it, carefully going over each gloomy detail. It was framed in the rain and the darkness of a yesterday. There was a small clearing there—a clearing in a dense wood beside a river—the same river which she could have seen below her now, had she looked. In the foreground was a cabin. She entered the cabin and stood beside a table upon which burned a candle. A man stood beside the table also—a reckless-eyed man, holding a heavy revolver. Another man stood there, too—a man of God. While Sheila watched the man's lips opened; she could hear the words that came through them—she would never forget them:

“To have and to hold from this day forth . . . till death do you part. . .”

It was not a dream, it was the picture of an actual occurrence. She saw every detail of it. She could hear her own protests, her threats, her pleadings; she lived over again her terror as she had crouched in the bunk until the dawn.

The man had not molested her, had not

even spoken to her after the ceremony; had ignored her entirely. When the dawn came she had heard him talking to the parson, but could not catch their words. Later she had mounted her pony and had ridden away through the sunshine of the morning. She had been married—it was her wedding day.

When she had reached the crest of a long rise after her departure from the cabin she had halted her pony to look back, hoping that it all might have been a dream. But it had not been a dream. There was the dense wood, the clearing, and the cabin. Beside them was the river. And there, riding slowly away over the narrow trail which she had traveled the night before, was the parson—she could see his gray beard in the white sunlight. Dry eyed, she had turned from the scene. A little later, turning again, she saw the parson fade into the horizon. That, she knew, was the last she would ever see of him. He had gone out of her life forever—the desert had swallowed him up.

But the picture was still vivid; she had seen it during every waking moment of the

month that she had been at the Double R ranch; it was before her every night in her dreams. It would not fade.

She knew that the other picture was beautiful—the picture of this world into which she had ridden so confidently, yet she was afraid to dwell upon it for fear that its beauty would seem to mock her. For had not nature conspired against her? Yet she knew that she alone was to blame—she, obstinate, willful, heedless. Had not her father warned her? “Wait,” he had said, and the words flamed before her eyes—“wait until I go. Wait a month. The West is a new country; anything, everything, can happen to you out there—alone.”

“Nothing can happen,” had been her reply. “I will go straight from Lazette to the Double R. See that you telegraph instructions to Duncan to meet me. It will be a change; I am tired of the East and impatient to be away from it.”

Well, she had found a change. What would her father say when he heard of it—of her marriage to a cowboy, an unprincipled scoundrel? What could he say? The mar-

riage could be annulled, of course! it was not legal, could not be legal. No law could be drawn which would recognize a marriage of that character, and she knew that she had only to tell her father to have the machinery of the law set in motion. Could she tell him? Could she bear his reproaches, his pity, after her heedlessness?

What would her friends say when they heard of it—as they must hear if she went to the law for redress? Her friends in the East whose good wishes, whose respect, she desired? Mockers there would be among them, she was certain; there were mockers everywhere, and she feared their taunts, the shafts of sarcasm that would be launched at her—aye, that would strike her—when they heard that she had passed a night in a lone cabin with a strange cowboy—had been married to him!

A month had passed since the afternoon on which she had ridden up to the porch of the Double R ranchhouse to be greeted by Duncan with the information that he had that morning received a telegram from her father announcing her coming. It had been

brought from Lazette by a puncher who had gone there for the mail, and Duncan was at that moment preparing to drive to Lazette to meet her, under the impression that she would arrive that day. There had been a mistake, of course, but what did it matter now? The damage had been wrought and she closed her lips. A month had passed and she had not told—she would never tell.

Conversations she had had with Duncan; he seemed a gentleman, living at the Double R ranchhouse with his sister, but in no conversation with anyone had Sheila even mentioned Dakota's name, fearing that something in her manner might betray her secret. To everyone but herself the picture of her adventure that night on the trail must remain invisible.

She looked furtively at Duncan, stretched out beside her on the grass. What would he say if he knew? He would not be pleased, she was certain, for during the month that she had been at the Double R—riding out almost daily with him—he had forced her to see that he had taken a liking to her—more, she herself had observed the telltale

signs of something deeper than mere liking.

She had not encouraged this, of course, for she was not certain that she liked Duncan, though he had treated her well—almost too well, in fact, for she had at times felt a certain reluctance in accepting his little attentions—such personal service as kept him almost constantly at her side. His manner, too, was ingratiating; he smiled too much to suit her; his presumption of proprietorship over her irritated her not a little.

As she sat beside him on the grass she found herself studying him, as she had done many times when he had not been conscious of her gaze.

He was thirty-two,—he had told her so himself in a burst of confidence—though she believed him to be much older. The sprinkling of gray hair at his temples had caused her to place his age at thirty-seven or eight. Besides, there were the lines of his face—the set lines of character—indicating established habits of thought which would not show so deeply in a younger face. His mouth, she thought, was a trifle weak, yet not exactly weak either, but full-lipped and

sensual, with little curves at the corners which, she was sure, indicated either vindictiveness or cruelty, perhaps both.

Taken altogether his was not a face to trust fully; its owner might be too easily guided by selfish considerations. Duncan liked to talk about himself; he had been talking about himself all the time that Shelia had sat beside him reviewing the mental picture. But apparently he had about exhausted that subject now, and presently he looked up at her, his eyes narrowing quizzically.

"You have been here a month now," he said. "How do you like the country?"

"I like it," she returned.

She was looking now at the other picture, watching the shimmer of the sun on the distant mountain peaks.

"It improves," he said, "on acquaintance—like the people." He flashed a smile at her, showing his teeth.

"I haven't seen very many people," she returned, not looking at him, but determined to ignore the personal allusion, to which, plainly, he had meant to guide her.

“But those that you have seen?” he persisted.

“I have formed no opinions.”

She *had* formed an opinion, though, a conclusive one—concerning Dakota. But she had no idea of communicating it to Duncan. Until now, strangely enough, she had had no curiosity concerning him. Bitter hatred and resentment had been so active in her brain that the latter had held no place for curiosity. Or at least, if it had been there, it had been a subconscious emotion, entirely overshadowed by bitterness. Of late, though her resentment toward Dakota had not abated, she had been able to review the incident of her marriage to him with more composure, and therefore a growing curiosity toward the man seemed perfectly justifiable. Curiosity moved her now as she smiled deliberately at Duncan.

“I have seen no one except your sister, a few cowboys, and yourself. I haven’t paid much attention to the cowboys, I like your sister, and I am not in the habit of telling people to their faces what I think of them. The country does not appear to be densely

82 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

populated. Are there no other ranches around here—no other cattlemen?”

“The Double R ranch covers an area of one hundred and sixty square miles,” said Duncan. “The ranchhouse is right near the center of it. For about twenty miles in every direction you won’t find anybody but Double R men. There are line-camps, of course—dugouts where the men hang out over night sometimes—but that’s all. To my knowledge there are only two men with shacks around here, and they’re mostly of no account. One of them is Doubler—Ben Doubler—who hangs out near Two Forks, and the other is a fellow who calls himself Dakota, who’s got a shack about twenty miles down the Ute, a little off the Lazette trail.”

“They are ranchers, I suppose?”

Sheila’s face was averted so that Duncan might not see the interest in her eyes, or the red which had suddenly come into her cheeks.

“Ranchers?” There was a sneer in Duncan’s laugh. “Well, you might call them that. But they’re only nesters. They’ve got a few head of cattle and a brand. It’s

likely they've put their brands on quite a few of the Double R cattle."

"You mean——" began Sheila in a low voice.

"I mean that I think they're rustlers—cattle thieves!" said Duncan venomously.

The flush had gone from Sheila's cheeks; she turned a pale face to the Double R manager.

"How long have these men lived in the vicinity of the Double R?"

"Doubler has been hanging around here for seven or eight years. He was here when I came and mebbe he's been here longer. Dakota's been here about five years. He bought his brand—the Star—from another nester—Texas Blanca."

"They've been stealing the Double R cattle, you say?" questioned Sheila.

"That's what I think."

"Why don't you have them arrested?"

Duncan laughed mockingly. "Arrested! That's good. You've been living where there's law. But there's no law out here; no law to cover cattle stealing, except our own. And then we've got to have the goods. The sheriff won't do anything when cattle

84 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

are stolen, but he acts mighty sudden when a man's hung for stealing cattle, if the man ain't caught with the goods."

"Caught with the goods?"

"Caught in the act of stealing. If we catch a man with the goods and hang him there ain't usually anything said."

"And you haven't been able to catch these men, Dakota and Doubler, in the act of stealing."

"They're too foxy."

"If I were manager of this ranch and suspected anyone of stealing any of its cattle, I would catch them!" There was a note of angry impatience in Sheila's voice which caused Duncan to look sharply at her. He reddened, suspecting disparagement of his managerial ability in the speech.

"Mebbe," he said, with an attempt at lightness. "But as a general thing nosing out a rustler is a pretty ticklish proposition. Nobody goes about that work with a whole lot of enthusiasm."

"Why?" There was scorn in Sheila's voice, scorn in her uplifted chin. But she did not look at Duncan.

"Why?" he repeated. "Well, because it's perfectly natural for a man to want to live as long as he can. I don't like them nesters—Dakota especially—and I'd like mighty well to get something on them. But I ain't taking any chances on Dakota."

"Why?" Again the monosyllable was pregnant with scorn.

"I forgot that you ain't acquainted out here," laughed the manager. "No one is taking any chances with Dakota—not even the sheriff. There's something about the cuss which seems to discourage a man when he's close to him—close enough to do any shooting. I've seen Dakota throw down on a man so quick that it would make you dizzy."

"Throw down?"

"Shoot at a man. There was a gambler over in Lazette thought to euchre Dakota. A gun-man he was, from Texas, and—well, they carried the gambler out. It was done so sudden that nobody saw it."

"Killed him?" There was repressed horror in Sheila's voice.

"No, he wasn't entirely put out of busi-

ness. Dakota only made him feel cheap. Creased him."

"Creased him?"

"Grazed his head with the bullet. Done it intentionally, they say. Told folks he didn't have any desire to send the gambler over the divide; just wanted to show him that when he was playin' with fire he ought to be careful. There ain't no telling what Dakota'd do if he got riled, though."

Sheila's gaze was on Duncan fairly, her eyes alight with contempt. "So you are all afraid of him?" she said, with a bitterness that surprised the manager.

"Well, I reckon it would amount to about that, if you come right down to the truth," he confessed, reddening a little.

"You are afraid of him, too I suppose?"

"I reckon it ain't just that," he parried, "but I ain't taking any foolish risks."

Sheila rose and walked to her pony, which was browsing the tops of some mesquite near by. She reached the animal, mounted, and then turned and looked at Duncan scornfully.

"A while ago you asked for my opinion

of the people of this country," she said. "I am going to express that opinion now. It is that, in spite of his unsavory reputation, Dakota appears to be the only *man* here!"

She took up the reins and urged her pony away from the butte and toward the level that stretched away to the Double R buildings in the distance. For an instant Duncan stood looking after her, his face red with embarrassment, and then with a puzzled frown he mounted and followed her.

Later he came up with her at the Double R corral gate and resumed the conversation.

"Then I reckon you ain't got no use for rustlers?" he said.

"Meaning Dakota?" she questioned, a smoldering fire in her eyes.

"I reckon."

"I wish," she said, facing Duncan, her eyes flashing, "that you would kill him!"

"Why ——" said Duncan, changing color.

But Sheila had dismounted and was walking rapidly toward the ranchhouse, leaving Duncan alone with his unfinished speech and his wonder.

CHAPTER V

DAKOTA EVENS A SCORE

WITH the thermometer at one hundred and five it was not to be expected that there would be much movement in Lazette. As a matter of fact, there was little movement anywhere. On the plains, which began at the edge of town, there was no movement, no life except when a lizard, seeking a retreat from the blistering sun, removed itself to a deeper shade under the leaves of the sage-brush, or a prairie-dog, popping its head above the surface of the sand, took a lightning survey of its surroundings, and apparently dissatisfied with the outlook whisked back into the bowels of the earth.

There was no wind, no motion; the little whirlwinds of dust that arose settled quickly down, the desultory breezes which had caused them departing as mysteriously as

they had come. In the blighting heat the country lay, dead, spreading to the infinite horizons; in the sky no speck floated against the dome of blue. More desolate than a derelict on the calm surface of the trackless ocean Lazette lay, its huddled buildings dingy with the dust of a continuing dry season, squatting in their dismal lonesomeness in the shimmering, blinding sun.

In a strip of shade under the eaves of the station sat the station agent, gazing drowsily from under the wide brim of his hat at the two glistening lines of steel that stretched into the interminable distance. Some cowponies, hitched to rails in front of the saloons and the stores, stood with drooping heads, tormented by myriad flies; a wagon or two, minus horses, occupied a space in front of a blacksmith shop.

In the Red Dog saloon some punchers on a holiday played cards at various tables, quietly drinking. Behind the rough bar Pete Moulin, the proprietor stood, talking to his bartender, Blacky.

"So that jasper's back again," commented the proprietor.

"Which?" The bartender followed the proprietor's gaze, which was on a man seated at a card table, his profile toward them, playing cards with several other men. The bartender's face showed perplexity.

Moulin laughed. "I forgot you ain't been here that long," he said. "That was before your time. That fellow settin' sideways to us is Texas Blanca."

"What's he callin' himself 'Texas' for?" queried the bartender. "He looks more like a greaser."

"Breed, I reckon," offered the proprietor. "Claims to have punched cows in Texas before he come here."

"What's he allowin' to be now?"

"Nobody knows. Used to own the Star—Dakota's brand. Sold out to Dakota five years ago. Country got too hot for him an' he had to pull his freight."

"Rustler?"

"You've said something. He's been suspected of it. But nobody's talkin' very loud about it."

"Not safe?"

"Not safe. He's lightning with a six.

Got his nerve to come back here, though."

"How's that?"

"Ain't you heard about it? I thought everybody'd heard about that deal. Blanca sold Dakota the Star. Then he pulled his freight immediate. A week or so later Duncan, of the Double R, rides up to Dakota's shack with a bunch of Double R boys an' accuses Dakota of rustlin' Double R cattle. Duncan had found twenty Double R calves runnin' with the Star cattle which had been marked secret. Blanca had run his iron on them an' sold them to Dakota for Star stock. Dakota showed Duncan his bill of sale, all regular, an' of course Duncan couldn't blame him. But there was some hard words passed between Duncan an' Dakota, an' Dakota ain't allowin' they're particular friends since.

"Dakota had to give up the calves, sure enough, an' he did. But sore! Dakota was sure some disturbed in his mind. He didn't show it much, bein' one of them quiet kind, but he says to me one day not long after Duncan had got the calves back: 'I've been stung, Pete,' he says, soft an' even like;

92 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

'I've been stung proper, by that damned oiler. Not that I'm carin' for the money end of it; Duncan findin' them calves with my stock has damaged my reputation.' Then he laffed—one of them little short laffs which he gets off sometimes when things don't just suit him—the way he's laffed a couple of times when someone's tried to run a cold lead proposition in on him. He fair freezes my blood when he gets it off.

"Well, he says to me: 'Mebbe I'll be runnin' in with Blanca one of these days.' An' that's all he ever says about it. Likely he expected Blanca to come back. An' sure enough he has. Reckon he thinks that mebbe Dakota didn't get wise to the calf deal."

"In his place," said Blacky, eyeing Blanca furtively, "I'd be makin' some inquiries. Dakota ain't no man to trifle with."

"Trifle!" Moulin's voice was pregnant with awed admiration. "I reckon there ain't no one who knows Dakota's goin' to trifle with him—he's discouraged that long

ago. Square, too, square as they make 'em."

"The Lord knows the country needs square men," observed Blacky.

He caught a sign from a man seated at a table and went over to him with a bottle and a glass. While Blacky was engaged in this task the door opened and Dakota came in.

Moulin's admiration and friendship for Dakota might have impelled him to warn Dakota of the presence of Blanca, and he did hold up a covert finger, but Dakota at that moment was looking in another direction and did not observe the signal.

He continued to approach the bar and Blacky, having a leisure moment, came forward and stood ready to serve him. A short nod of greeting passed between the three, and Blacky placed a bottle on the bar and reached for a glass. Dakota made a negative sign with his head—short and resolute.

"I'm in for supplies," he laughed, "but not that."

"Not drinkin'?" queried Moulin.

"I'm pure as the driven snow," drawled Dakota.

"How long has that been goin' on?" Moulin's grin was skeptical.

"A month."

Moulin looked searchingly at Dakota, saw that he was in earnest, and suddenly reached a hand over the bar.

"Shake!" he said. "I hate to knock my own business, an' you've been a pretty good customer, but if you mean it, it's the most sensible thing you ever done. Of course you didn't hit it regular, but there's been times when I've thought that if I could have three or four customers like you I'd retire in a year an' spend the rest of my life countin' my dust!" He was suddenly serious, catching Dakota's gaze and winking expressively.

"Friend of yourn here," he said.

Dakota took a flashing glance at the men at the card tables and Moulin saw his lips straighten and harden. But in the next instant he was smiling gravely at the proprietor.

"Thanks, Pete," he said quietly. "But you're some reckless with the English language when you're calling him my friend."

Maybe he'll be proving that he didn't mean to skin me on that deal."

He smiled again and then left the bar and strode toward Blanca. The latter continued his card playing, apparently unaware of Dakota's approach, but at the sound of his former victim's voice he turned and looked up slowly, his face wearing a bland smile.

It was plain to Moulin that Blanca had known all along of Dakota's presence in the saloon—perhaps he had seen him enter. The other card players ceased playing and leaned back in their chairs, watching, for some of them knew something of the calf deal, and there was that in Dakota's greeting to Blanca which warned them of impending trouble.

"Blanca," said Dakota quietly, "you can pay for those calves now."

It pleased Blanca to dissemble. But it was plain to Moulin—as it must have been plain to everybody who watched Blanca—that a shadow crossed his face at Dakota's words. Evidently he had entertained a hope that his duplicity had not been discovered.

"Calves?" he said. "What calves, my frien'?" He dropped his cards to the table and turned his chair around, leaning far back in it and hooking his right thumb in his cartridge belt, just above the holster of his pistol. "I theenk it mus' be mistak'."

"Yes," returned Dakota, a slow, grimly humorous smile reaching his face, "it was a mistake. You made it, Blanca. Duncan found it out. Duncan took the calves—they belonged to him. You're going to pay for them."

"I pay for heem?" The bland smile on Blanca's face had slowly faded with the realization that his victim was not to be further misled by him. In place of the smile his face now wore an expression of sneering contempt, and his black eyes had taken on a watchful glitter. He spoke slowly: "I pay for no calves, my frien'."

"You'll pay," said Dakota, an ominously quiet drawl in his voice, "or——"

"Or what?" Blanca showed his white teeth in a tigerish smirk.

"This town ain't big enough for both of

us," said Dakota, his eyes cold and alert as they watched Blanca's hand at his cartridge belt. "One of us will leave it by sundown. I reckon that's all."

He deliberately turned his back on Blanca and walked to the door, stepping down into the street. Blanca looked after him, sneering. . An instant later Blanca turned and smiled at his companions at the table.

"It ain't my funeral," said one of the card players, "but if I was in your place I'd begin to think that me stayin' here was crowdin' the population of this town by one."

Blanca's teeth gleamed. "My frien'," he said insinuatingly, "it's your deal." His smile grew. "Thees is a nize country," he continued. "I like it ver' much. I come back here to stay. Dakota—hees got the Star too cheap." He tapped his gun holster significantly. "To-night Dakota hees go somewhere else. To-morrow who takes the Star? You?" He pointed to each of the card players in turn. "You?" he questioned. "You take it?" He smiled at their

98 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

negative signs. "Well, then, Blanca take it. Peste! Dakota give himself till sundown!"

.

The six-o'clock was an hour and thirty minutes late. For two hours Sheila Langford had been on the station platform awaiting its coming. For a full half hour she had stood at one corner of the platform straining her eyes to watch a thin skein of smoke that trailed off down the horizon, but which told her that the train was coming. It crawled slowly—like a huge serpent—over the wilderness of space, growing always larger, steaming its way through the golden sunshine of the afternoon, and after a time, with a grinding of brakes and the shrill hiss of escaping air, it drew alongside the station platform.

A brakeman descended, the conductor strode stiffly to the telegrapher's window, two trunks came out of the baggage car, and a tall man of fifty alighted and was folded into Sheila's welcoming arms. For a moment the two stood thus, while the passengers smiled sympathetically. Then the

man held Sheila off at arm's length and looked searchingly at her.

"Crying?" he said. "What a welcome!"

"Oh, daddy!" said Sheila. In this moment she was very near to telling him what had happened to her on the day of her arrival at Lazette, but she felt that it was impossible with him looking at her; she could not at a blow cast a shadow over the joy of his first day in the country where, henceforth, he was to make his home. And so she stood sobbing softly on his shoulder while he, aware of his inability to cope with anything so mysterious as a woman's tears, caressed her gently and waited patiently for her to regain her composure.

"Then nothing happened to you after all," he laughed, patting her cheeks. "Nothing, in spite of my croaking."

"Nothing," she answered. The opportunity was gone now; she was committed irrevocably to her secret.

"You like it here? Duncan has made himself agreeable?"

"It is a beautiful country, though a little lonesome after—after Albany. I miss my

100 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

friends, of course. But Duncan's sister has done her best, and I have been able to get along."

The engine bell clanged and they stood side by side as the train pulled slowly away from the platform. Langford solemnly waved a farewell to it.

"This is the moment for which I have been looking for months," he said, with what, it seemed to Sheila, was almost a sigh of relief. He turned to her with a smile. "I will look after the baggage," he said, and leaving her he approached the station agent and together they examined the trunks which had come out of the baggage car.

Sheila watched him while he engaged in this task. His face seemed a trifle drawn; he had aged much during the month that she had been separated from him. The lines of his face had grown deeper; he seemed, now that she saw him at a distance, to be care-worn—tired. She had heard people call him a hard man; she knew that business associates had complained of what they were pleased to call his "sharp methods"; it had

even been hinted that his "methods" were irregular.

It made no difference to her, however, what people thought of him, or what they said of him, he had been a kind and indulgent parent to her and she supposed that in business it was everybody's business to look sharply after their own interests. For there were jealous people everywhere; envy stalks rampant through the world; failure cavils at mediocrity, mediocrity sneers at genius. And Sheila had always considered her father a genius, and the carping of those over whom her father had ridden roughshod had always sounded in her ears like tributes.

As quite unconsciously we are prone to place the interests of self above considerations for the comfort and the convenience of others, so Sheila had grown to judge her father through the medium of his treatment of her. Her own father—who had died during her infancy—could not have treated her better than had Langford. Since her mother's death some years before, Langford had been both father and mother to her, and

her affection for him had flourished in the sunshine of his. No matter what other people thought, she was satisfied with him.

As a matter of fact David Dowd Langford allowed no one—not even Sheila—to look into his soul. What emotions slumbered beneath the mask of his habitual imperturbability no one save Langford himself knew. During all his days he had successfully fought against betraying his emotions and now, at the age of fifty, there was nothing of his character revealed in his face except sternness. If addicted to sharp practice in business no one would be likely to suspect it, not even his victim. Could one have looked steadily into his eyes one might find there a certain gleam to warn one of trickery, only one would not be able to look steadily into them, for the reason that they would not allow you. They were shifty, crafty eyes that took one's measure when one least expected them to do so.

Over the motive which had moved her father to retire from business while still in his prime Sheila did not speculate. Nor had she speculated when he had bought the

Double R ranch and announced his intention to spend the remainder of his days on it. She supposed that he had grown tired of the unceasing bustle and activity of city life, as had she, and longed for something different, and she had been quite as eager as he to take up her residence here. This had been the limit of her conjecturing.

He had told her when she left Albany that he would follow her in a month. And therefore, in a month to the day, knowing his habit of punctuality, Sheila had come to Lazette for him, having been driven over from the Double R by one of the cowboys.

She saw the station agent now, beckoning to the driver of the wagon, and she went over to the edge of the station platform and watched while the trunks were tumbled into the wagon.

The driver was grumbling good naturedly to Langford.

"That darned six-o'clock train is always late," he was saying. "It's a quarter to eight now an' the sun is goin' down. If that train had been on time we could have made part of the trip in the daylight."

The day had indeed gone. Sheila looked toward the mountains and saw that great long shadows were lengthening from their bases; the lower half of the sun had sunk behind a distant peak; the quiet colors of the sunset were streaking the sky and glowing over the plains.

The trunks were in; the station agent held the horses by the bridles, quieting them; the driver took up the reins; Sheila was helped to the seat by her father, he jumped in himself, and they were off down the street, toward a dim trail that led up a slope that began at the edge of town and melted into space.

The town seemed deserted. Sheila saw a man standing near the front door of a saloon, his hands on his hips. He did not appear interested in either the wagon or its occupants; his gaze roved up and down the street and he nervously fingered his cartridge belt. He was a brown-skinned man, almost olive, Sheila thought as her gaze rested on him, attired after the manner of the country, with leathern chaps, felt hat, boots, spurs, neckerchief.

"Why, it is sundown already!" Sheila heard her father say. "What a sudden change! A moment ago the light was perfect!"

A subconscious sense only permitted Sheila to hear her father's voice, for her thoughts and eyes were just then riveted on another man who had come out of the door of another saloon a little way down the street. She recognized the man as Dakota and exclaimed sharply.

She felt her father turn; heard the driver declare, "It's comin' off," though she had not the slightest idea of his meaning. Then she realized that he had halted the horses; saw that he had turned in his seat and was watching something to the rear of them intently.

"We're out of range," she heard him say, speaking to her father.

"What's wrong?" This was her father's voice.

"Dakota an' Blanca are havin' a run-in," announced the driver. "Dakota's give Blanca till sundown to get out of town. It's sundown now an' Blanca ain't pulled his

freight, an' it's likely that hell will be a-pop-pin' sorta sudden."

Sheila cowered in her seat, half afraid to look at Dakota—who was walking slowly toward the man who still stood in front of the saloon—though in spite of her fears and misgivings the fascination of the scene held her gaze steadily on the chief actors.

Out of the corners of her eyes she could see that far down the street men were congregated; they stood in doorways, at convenient corners, their eyes directed toward Dakota and the other man. In the sepulchral calm which had fallen there came to Sheila's ears sounds that in another time she would not have noticed. Somewhere a door slammed; there came to her ears the barking of a dog, the neigh of a horse—sharply the sounds smote the quiet atmosphere, they seemed odd to the point of unreality.

However, the sounds did not long distract her attention from the chief actors in the scene which was being worked out in front of her; the noises died away and she gave her entire attention to the men. She saw

Dakota reach a point about thirty feet from the man in front of the saloon—Blanca. As Dakota continued to approach, Sheila observed an evil smile flash suddenly to Blanca's face; saw a glint of metal in the faint light; heard the crash of his revolver; shuddered at the flame spurt. She expected to see Dakota fall—hoped that he might. Instead, she saw him smile—in much the fashion in which he had smiled that night in the cabin when he had threatened to shoot the parson if she did not consent to marry him. And then his hand dropped swiftly to the butt of the pistol at his right hip.

Sheila's eyes closed; she swayed and felt her father's arm come out and grasp her to keep her from falling. But she was not going to fall; she had merely closed her eyes to blot out the scene which she could not turn from. She held her breath in an agony of suspense, and it seemed an age until she heard a crashing report—and then another. Then silence.

Unable longer to resist looking, Sheila opened her eyes. She saw Dakota walk forward and stand over Blanca, looking

down at him, his pistol still in hand. Blanca was face down in the dust of the street, and as Dakota stood over him Sheila saw the half-breed's body move convulsively and then become still. Dakota sheathed his weapon and, without looking toward the wagon in which Sheila sat, turned and strode unconcernedly down the street. A man came out of the door of the saloon in front of which Blanca's body lay, looking down at it curiously. Other men were running toward the spot; there were shouts, oaths.

For the first time in her life Sheila had seen a man killed—murdered—and there came to her a recollection of Dakota's words that night in the cabin: "Have you ever seen a man die?" She had surmised from his manner that night that he would not hesitate to kill the parson, and now she knew that her sacrifice had not been made in vain. A sob shook her, the world reeled, blurred, and she covered her face with her hands.

"Oh!" she said in a strained, hoarse voice. "Oh! The brute!"

"Hey!" From a great distance the

driver's voice seemed to come. "Hey! What's that? Well, mebbe. But I reckon Blanca won't rustle any more cattle. "God!" he added in an awed voice; "both of them hit him!"

Blanca was dead then, there could be no doubt of that. Sheila felt herself swaying and tried to grasp the end of the seat to steady herself. She heard her father's voice raised in alarm, felt his arm come out again and grasp her, and then darkness settled around her.

When she recovered consciousness her father's arms were still around her and the buckboard was in motion. Dusk had come; above her countless stars flickered in the deep blue of the sky.

"I reckon she's plum shocked," she heard the driver say.

"I don't wonder," returned Langford, and Sheila felt a shiver run over him. "Great guns!" Sheila wondered at the tone he used. "That man is a marvel with a pistol! Did you notice how cool he took it?"

"Cool!" The driver laughed. "If you

get acquainted with Dakota you'll find out that he's cool. He's an iceberg, that's what he is!"

"They'll arrest him, I suppose?" queried Langford.

"Arrest him! What for? Didn't he give Blanca his chance? That's why I'm tellin' you he's cool!"

It was past two o'clock when the buckboard pulled up at the Double R corral gates and Langford helped Shelia down. She was still pale and trembling and did not remain downstairs to witness her father's introduction to Duncan's sister, but went immediately to her room. Sleep was far from her, however, for she kept dwelling over and over on the odd fortune which had killed Blanca and allowed Dakota to live, when the latter's death would have brought to an end the distasteful relationship which his freakish impulse had forced upon her.

She remembered Dakota's words in the cabin. Was Fate indeed running this game—if game it might be called?

CHAPTER VI

KINDRED SPIRITS

LOOKING rather more rugged than when he had arrived at the station at Lazette two weeks before, his face tanned, but still retaining the smooth, sleek manner which he had brought with him from the East, David Dowd Langford sat in a big rocking chair on the lower gallery of the Double R ranchhouse, mentally appraising Duncan, who was seated near by, his profile toward Langford.

"So this Ben Doubler has been a thorn in your side?" questioned Langford softly.

"That's just it," returned Duncan, with an evil smile. "He has been and still is. And now I'm willing him to you. I don't know when I've been more tickled over getting rid of a man."

"Well," said Langford, leaning farther back in his chair and clasping his hands,

resting his chin on his thumbs, his lips curving with an ironic smile, "I suppose I ought to feel extremely grateful to you—especially since when I was negotiating the purchase of the ranch you didn't hint of a nester being on the property."

"I didn't sell Doubler to you," said Duncan.

Langford's smile was shallow. "But I get him just the same," he said. "As a usual thing it is pretty hard to get rid of a nester, isn't it?"

"I haven't been able to get rid of this one," returned Duncan. "He don't seem to be influenced by anything I say, or do. Some obstinate."

"Tried everything?"

"Yes."

"The law?"

Duncan made a gesture of disgust. "The law!" he said. "What for? I haven't been such a fool. He's got as much right to the open range as I have—as you will have. I bought a section, and he took up a quarter section. The only difference between us is that I own mine—or did own it until you

bought it—and he ain't proved on his. He is on the other side of the river and I'm on this. Or rather," he added with a grin, "he's on the other side and you are on this. He's got the best grass land in the country—and plenty of water."

"His rights, then," remarked Langford slowly, "equal yours—or mine. That is," he added, "he makes free use of the grass and water."

"That's so," agreed Duncan.

"Which reduces the profits of the Double R," pursued Langford.

"I reckon that's right."

"And you knew that when you sold me the Double R," continued Langford, his voice smooth and silky.

Duncan flashed a grin at the imperturbable face of the new owner. "I reckon I wasn't entirely ignorant of it," he said.

"That's bad business," remarked Langford in a detached manner.

"What is?" Duncan's face reddened slightly. "You mean that it was bad business for me to sell when I knowed Doubler owned land near the Double R?" There

was a slight sneer in his voice as he looked at Langford. "You've never been stung before, eh? Well, there's always a first time for everything, and I reckon—according to what I've heard—that you ain't been exactly no Sunday school scholar yourself."

Langford's eyes were narrowed to slits. "I meant that it was bad business to allow Doubler's presence on the Two Forks to affect the profits of the Double R. Perhaps I have been stung—as you call it—but if I have been I am not complaining."

Duncan's eyes glinted with satisfaction. He had expected a burst of anger from the new owner when he should discover that the value of his property was impaired by the presence of a nester near it, but the new owner apparently harbored no resentment over this unforeseen obstacle.

"I'm admitting," said Duncan, "that Doubler being there is bad business. But how are you going to prevent him staying there?"

"Have you tried?"—Langford looked obliquely at Duncan, drawling significantly—"force?"

"I have tried everything, I told you."

Duncan gazed at Langford with a new interest. It was the first time since the new owner had come to the Double R that he had dropped the mask of sleek smoothness behind which he concealed his passions. Even now the significance was more in his voice than in his words, and Duncan began to comprehend that Langford was deeper than he had thought.

"I'm glad to see that you appreciate the situation," he said, smiling craftily. "Some men are mighty careful not to do anything to hurt anybody else."

Langford favored Duncan with a steady gaze, which the latter returned, and both smiled.

"Business," presently said Langford with a quiet significance which was not lost on Duncan, "good business, demands the application of certain methods which are not always agreeable to the opposition." He took another sly glance at Duncan. "There ought to be a good many ways of making it plain to Doubler that he isn't wanted in this section of the country," he insinuated.

"I've tried to make some of the ways plain," said Duncan with a cold grin. "I got to the end of my string and hadn't any more things to try. That's why I decided to sell. I wanted to get away where I wouldn't be bothered. But I reckon that you'll be able to fix up something for him."

During the two weeks that Langford had been at the Double R Duncan had studied him from many angles and this exchange of talk had convinced him that he had not erred in his estimate of the new owner's character. As he had hinted to Langford, he had tried many plans to rid the country of the nester, and he remembered a time when Doubler had seen through one of his schemes to fasten the crime of rustling on him and had called him to account, and the recollection of what had happened at the interview between them was not pleasant. He had not bothered Doubler since that time, though there had lingered in his heart a desire for revenge. Many times, on some pretext or other, he had tried to induce his men to clash with Doubler, but without success. It had appeared to him that his men suspected

.

his motives and deliberately avoided the nester.

With a secret satisfaction he had watched Langford's face this morning when he had told him that Doubler had long been suspected of rustling; that the men of the Double R had never been able to catch him in the act, but that the number of cattle missing had seemed to indicate the nester's guilt.

Doubler's land was especially desirable, he had told Langford, and this was the truth. It was a quarter section lying adjacent to good water, and provided the best grass in the vicinity. Duncan had had trouble with Doubler over the water rights, too, but had been unsuccessful in ousting him because of the fact that since Doubler controlled the land he also controlled the water rights of the river adjoining it. The Two Forks was the only spot which could be used by thirsty cattle in the vicinity, for the river at other points was bordered with cliffs and hills and was inaccessible. And Doubler would not allow the Double R cattle to water at the Two Forks, though he had

issued this edict after his trouble with the Double R owner. Duncan, however, did not explain this to Langford.

The latter looked at him with a smooth smile. "It is plain from what you have been telling me," he said, "that there is no possibility of your succeeding in reaching a satisfactory agreement with Doubler, and therefore I expect that I will have to deal with him personally. I shall ride over some day and have a talk with him."

The prospect of becoming involved with the nester gave Langford a throb of joy. All his life he had been engaged in the task of overcoming business obstacles and he had reached the conclusion that the situation which now confronted him was nothing more or less than business. Of course it was not the business to which he had been accustomed, but it offered the opportunity for cold-blooded, merciless planning for personal gain; there were the elements of profit and loss; it would give him an opportunity to apply his peculiar genius, to grapple, to battle, and finally overthrow the opposing force.

Though he had allowed Duncan to see nothing of the emotions that rioted within him over the discovery that he had been victimized by the latter—at least to the extent of misrepresentation in the matter of the nester—there was in his mind a feeling of deep resentment against the former owner; he felt that he could no longer trust him, but for the sake of learning all the details of the new business he felt that he would have to make the best of a bad bargain. He had already arranged with Duncan to remain at the Double R throughout the season, but he purposed to leave him out of any dealings that he might have with Doubler. He smiled as he looked at Duncan.

“I like this country,” he said, leaning back in his chair and drawing a deep breath. “I was rather afraid at first that I would find it dull after the East. But this situation gives promise of action.”

Duncan was watching him with a crafty smile. “You reckon on running him off, or——” He leered at Langford significantly.

The latter’s face was impassive, his smile

dry. "Eh?" he said, abstractedly, as though his thoughts had been wandering from the subject. "Why, I really haven't given a thought to the method by which I ought to deal with Doubler. Perhaps," he added with a genial smile, "I may make a friend of him."

He observed Duncan's scowl and his smile grew.

CHAPTER VII

BOGGED DOWN

EACH day during the two weeks that her father had been at the Double R Sheila had accompanied him on his rides of exploration. She had grown tired of the continued companionship, and despite the novelty of the sight she had become decidedly wearied of looking at the cowboys in their native haunts. Not that they did not appeal to her, for on the contrary she had found them picturesque and had admired their manliness, but she longed to ride out alone where she could brood over her secret. The possession of it had taken the flavor out of the joys of this new life, had left it flat and filled with bitter memories.

She had detected a change in her father—he seemed coarse, domineering, entirely unlike his usual self. She attributed this

change in him to the country—it was hard and rough, and of course it was to be expected that Langford—or any man, for that matter—taking an active interest in ranch life, must reflect the spirit of the country.

She had developed a positive dislike for Duncan, which she took no trouble to conceal. She had discovered that the suspicions she had formed of his character during the first days of their acquaintance were quite correct—he was selfish, narrow, and brutal. He had accompanied her and her father on all their trips and his manner toward her had grown to be one of easy familiarity. This was another reason why she wanted to ride alone.

The day before she had spoken to Langford concerning the continued presence of Duncan on their rides, and he had laughed at her, assuring her that Duncan was not a “bad fellow,” and though she had not taken issue with him on this point she had decided that hereafter, in self protection, she would discontinue her rides with her father as long as he was accompanied by the former owner.

Determined to carry out this decision, she

was this morning saddling her pony at the corral gates when she observed Duncan standing near, watching her.

"You might have let me throw that saddle on," he said.

She flushed, angered that he should have been watching her without making his presence known. "I prefer to put the saddle on myself," she returned, busying herself with it after taking a flashing glance at him.

He laughed, pulled out a package of tobacco and some paper, and proceeded to roll a cigarette. When he had completed it he held a match to it and puffed slowly.

"Cross this morning," he taunted.

There was no reply, though Duncan might have been warned by the dark red in her cheeks. She continued to work with the saddle, lacing the latigo strings and tightening the cinches.

"We're riding down to the box canyon on the other side of the basin this morning," said Duncan. "We've got some strays penned up there. But your dad won't be ready for half an hour yet. You're in something of a hurry, it seems."

"You are going, I suppose?" questioned Sheila, pulling at the rear cinch, the pony displaying a disinclination to allow it to be buckled.

"I reckon."

"I don't see," said Sheila, straightening and facing him, "why you have to go with father everywhere."

Duncan flushed. "Your father's aiming to learn the business," he said. "I'm showing him, telling him what I know about it. There's a chance that I won't be with the Double R after the fall round-up, if a deal which I have got on goes through."

"And I suppose you have a corner on all the knowledge of ranch life," suggested Sheila sarcastically.

He flushed darkly, but did not answer.

After Sheila had completed the tightening of the cinches she led the pony beside the corral fence, mounted, and without looking at Duncan started to ride away.

"Wait!" he shouted, and she drew the pony to a halt and sat in the saddle, looking down at him with a contemptuous gaze as he stood in front of her.

"I thought you was going with your father?" he said.

"You are mistaken." She could not repress a smile over the expression of disappointment on his face. But without giving him any further satisfaction she urged her pony forward, leaving him standing beside the corral gates watching her with a frown.

She smiled many times while riding toward the river, thinking of his discomfiture, reveling in the thought that for once she had shown him that she resented the attitude of familiarity which he had adopted toward her.

She sat erect in the saddle, experiencing a feeling of elation which brought the color into her face and brightened her eyes. It was the first time since her arrival at the Double R that she had been able to ride out alone, and it was also the first time that she really appreciated the vastness and beauty of the country. For the trail to the river, which she had decided she would follow, led through a fertile country where the bunch grass grew long and green, the barren stretches of alkali were infrequent, and

126 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

where the low wooded hills and the shallow gullies seemed to hint at the mystery. Before long the depression which had made her life miserable had fled and she was enjoying herself.

When she reached the river she crossed it at a shallow and urged her pony up a sloping bank and out upon a grass plain that spread away like the level of a great, green sea. Once into the plain, though, she discovered that its promise of continuing green was a mere illusion, for the grass grew here in bunches, the same as it grew on the Double R side of the river. Yet though she was slightly disappointed she found many things to interest her, and she lingered long over the odd rock formations that she encountered and spent much time peering down into gullies and exploring sand draws which seemed to be on every side.

About noon, when she became convinced that she had seen everything worth seeing in that section of the country, she wheeled her pony and headed it back toward the river. She reached it after a time and urged her beast along its banks, searching for the

shallow which she had crossed some time before. A dim trail led along the river and she felt certain that if she followed it long enough it would lead her to the crossing, but after riding half an hour and encountering nothing but hills and rock cliffs she began to doubt. But she rode on for another half hour and then, slightly disturbed over her inability to find the shallow, she halted the pony and looked about her.

The country was strange and unfamiliar and a sudden misgiving assailed her. Had she lost her idea of direction? She looked up at the sun and saw that it was slightly past the zenith on its downward path. She smiled. Of course all she had to do was to follow the river and in time she would come in sight of the Double R buildings. Certain that she had missed the shallow because of her interest in other things, she urged her pony about and cantered it slowly over the back trail. A little later, seeing an arroyo which seemed to give promise of leading to the shallow she sought, she descended it and found that it led to a flat and thence to the river. The crossing seemed unfamiliar, and

yet she supposed that one crossing would do quite as well as another, and so she smiled and continued on toward it.

There was a fringe of shrubbery at the edge of what appeared to have once been a swamp, though now it was dry and made fairly good footing for her pony. The animal acted strangely, however, when she tried to urge it through the fringing shrubbery, and she was compelled to use her quirt vigorously.

Once at the water's edge she halted the pony and viewed the crossing with satisfaction. She decided that it was a much better crossing than the one she had encountered on the trip out. It was very shallow, not over thirty feet wide, she estimated, and through the clear water she could easily see the hard, sandy bottom. It puzzled her slightly to observe that there were no wagon tracks or hoof prints in the sand anywhere around her, as there would be were the crossing used ever so little. It seemed to be an isolated section of the country though, and perhaps the cattlemen used the crossing little—there was even a chance that she was

the first to discover its existence. She must remember to ask someone about it when she returned to the Double R.

She urged the pony gently with her booted heel and voice, but the little animal would not budge. Impatient over its obstinacy, she again applied the quirt vigorously. Stung to desperation the pony stood erect for an instant, pawing the air frantically with its fore hoofs, and then, as the quirt continued to lash its flanks, it lunged forward, snorting in apparent fright, made two or three eccentric leaps, splashing water high over Sheila's head, and then came to a sudden stop in the middle of the stream.

Sheila nibbled at her lips in vexation. Again, convinced that the pony was merely exhibiting obstinacy, she applied the quirt to its flanks. The animal floundered and struggled, but did not move out of its tracks.

Evidently something had gone wrong. Sheila peered over the pony's mane into the water, which was still clear in spite of the pony's struggling, and sat suddenly erect, stifling cry of amazement. The pony was mired fast! Its legs, to a point just above

the knees, had disappeared into the river bottom!

As she straightened, a chilling fear clutching at her heart, she felt the cold water of the river splashing against her booted legs. And now knowledge came to her in a sudden, sickening flood. She had ridden her pony fairly into a bed of quicksand!

For some minutes she sat motionless in the saddle, stunned and nerveless. She saw now why there were no tracks or hoof prints leading down into the crossing. She remembered now that Duncan had warned her of the presence of quicksand in the river, but the chance of her riding into any of it had seemed to be so remote that she had paid very little attention to Duncan's warning. Much as she disliked the man she would have given much to have him close at hand now. If he had only followed her!

She was surprised at her coolness. She realized that the situation was precarious, for though she had never before experienced a quicksand, she had read much of them in books, and knew that the pony was hopelessly mired. But it seemed that there could

be no immediate danger, for the river bottom looked smooth and hard; it was grayish-black, and she was so certain that the footing was good that she pulled her feet out of the stirrups, swung around, and stepped down into the water.

She had stepped lightly, bearing only a little of her weight on the foot while holding to the saddle, but the foot sank instantly into the sand and the water darkened around it. She tried again in another spot, putting a little more weight on her foot this time. She went in almost to the knee and was surprised to find that she had to exert some little strength to pull the foot out, there was so great a suction.

With the discovery that she was really in a dangerous predicament came a mental panic which threatened to take the form of hysteria. She held tightly to the pommel of the saddle, shutting her eyes on the desolate world around her, battling against the great fear that rose within her and choked her. When she opened her eyes again the world was reeling and objects around her were strangely blurred, but she held tightly

to the saddle, telling herself that she must retain her composure, and after a time she regained the mastery over herself.

With the return of her mental faculties she began to give some thought to escape. But escape seemed to be impossible. Looking backward toward the bank she had left, she saw that the pony must have come fifteen or twenty feet in the two or three plunges it had made. She found herself wondering how it could have succeeded in coming that distance. Behind her the water had become perfectly clear, and the impressions left by the pony's hoofs had filled up and the river bottom looked as smooth and inviting as it had seemed when she had urged the pony into it.

In front of her was a stretch of water of nearly the same width as that which lay behind her. To the right and left the grayish-black sand spread far, but only a short distance beyond where she could discern the sand there were rocks that stuck above the water with little ripples around them.

The rocks were too far away to be of any assistance to her, however, and her heart

sank when she realized that her only hope of escape lay directly ahead.

She leaned over and laid her head against the pony's neck, smoothing and patting its shoulders. The animal whinnied appealingly and she stifled a sob of remorse over her action in forcing it into the treacherous sand, for it had sensed the danger while obeying her blindly.

How long she lay with her head against the pony's neck she did not know, but when she finally sat erect again she found that the water was touching the hem of her riding skirt and that her feet, dangling at each side of the pony, were deep in the sand of the river bottom. With a cry of fright she drew them out and crossed them before her on the pommel of the saddle. With the movement the pony sank several inches, it seemed to her; she saw the water suddenly flow over its back; heard it neigh loudly, appealingly, with a note of anguish and terror which seemed almost human, and feeling a sudden, responsive emotion of horror and despair, Sheila bowed her head against the pony's mane and sobbed softly.

They would both die, she knew—horribly. They would presently sink beneath the surface of the sand, the water would flow over them and obliterate all traces of their graves, and no one would ever know what had become of them.

Some time later—it might have been five minutes or an hour—Sheila could not have told—she heard the pony neigh again, and this time it seemed there was a new note in the sound—a note of hope! She raised her head and looked up. And there on the bank before her, uncoiling his rope from the saddle horn and looking very white and grim, was Dakota!

Sheila sat motionless, not knowing whether to cry or laugh, finally compromising with the appeal, uttered with all the composure at her command:

“Won’t you please get us out of here?”

“That’s what I am aiming to do,” he said, and never did a voice sound sweeter in her ears; at that moment she almost forgave him for the great crime he had committed against her.

He seemed not in the least excited, con-

tinuing to uncoil his rope and recoil it again into larger loops. "Hold your hands over your head!" came his command.

She did as she was bidden. He had not dismounted from his pony, but had ridden up to the very edge of the quicksand, and as she raised her hands she saw him twirl the rope once, watched as it sailed out, settled down around her waist, and was drawn tight.

There was now a grim smile on his face. "You're in for a wetting," he said. "I'm sorry—but it can't be helped. Get your feet off to one side so that you won't get mixed up with the saddle. And keep your head above the water."

"Ye-s," she answered tremulously, dreading the ordeal, dreading still more the thought of her appearance when she would finally reach the bank.

His pony was in motion instantly, pulling strongly, following out its custom of dragging a roped steer, and Sheila slipped off the saddle and into the water, trying to keep her feet under her. But she overbalanced and fell with a splash, and in this manner was

dragged, gasping, strangling, and dripping wet, to the bank.

Dakota was off his pony long before she had reached the solid ground and was at her side before she had cleared the water, helping her to her feet and loosening the noose about her waist.

"Don't, please!" she said frigidly, as his hand touched her.

"Then I won't." He smiled and stepped back while she fumbled with the rope and finally threw it off. "What made you try that shallow?" he asked.

"I suppose I have a right to ride where I please?" He had saved her life, of course, and she was very grateful to him, but that was no reason why he should presume to speak familiarly to her. She really believed—in spite of the obligation under which he had placed her—that she hated him more than ever.

But he did not seem to be at all disturbed over her manner. On the contrary, looking at him and trying her best to be scornful, he seemed to be laboring heroically to stifle some emotion—amusement, she decided—

and she tried to freeze him with an icy stare.

"Now, you don't look dignified, for a fact," he grinned, brazenly allowing his mirth to show in his eyes and in the sudden, curved lines that had come around his mouth.

"Still, you couldn't expect to look dignified, no matter how hard you tried, after being dragged through the water like that. Now could you?"

"It isn't the first time that I have amused you!" she said with angry sarcasm.

A cloud passed over his face, but was instantly superseded by a smile.

"So you haven't forgotten?" he said.

She did not deign to answer, but turned her back to him and looked at her partially submerged pony.

"Want to try it again?" he said mockingly.

She turned slowly and looked at him, her eyes flashing.

"Will you please stop being silly!" she said coldly. "If you were human you would be trying to get my pony out of that sand instead of standing there and trying to be smart!"

"Did you think that I was going to let him drown?" His smile had in it a quality of subtle mockery which made her eyes blaze with anger. Evidently he observed it for he smiled as he walked to his pony, coiling his rope and hanging it from the pommel of the saddle. "I certainly am not going to let your horse drown," he assured her, "for in this country horses are sometimes more valuable than people."

"Then why didn't you save the pony first?" she demanded hotly.

"How could I," he returned, fixing her with an amused glance, "with you looking so appealingly at me?"

She turned abruptly and left him, walking to a flat rock and seating herself upon it, wringing the water from her skirts, trying to get her hair out of her eyes, feeling very miserable, and wishing devoutly that Dakota might drown himself—after he had succeeded in pulling the pony from the quicksand.

But Dakota did not drown himself. Nor did he pull the pony out of the quicksand. She watched him as he rode to the water's

edge and looked at the animal. Her heart sank when he turned and looked gravely at her.

"I reckon your pony's done for, ma'am," he said. "There isn't anything of him above the sand but his head and a little of his neck. He's too far gone, ma'am. In half an hour he'll——"

Sheila stood up, wet and excited. "Can't you do something?" she pleaded. "Couldn't you pull him out with your lariat—like you did me?"

There was a grim humor in his smile. "What do you reckon would have happened to you if I had tried to pull you out by the neck?" he asked.

"But can't you do *something*?" she pleaded, her icy attitude toward him melting under the warmth of her affection and sympathy for the unfortunate pony. "Please do something!" she begged.

His face changed expression and he tapped one of his holsters significantly. "There's only this left, I reckon. Pulling him out by the neck would break it, sure. And it's never a nice thing to see—or hear—

a horse or a cow sinking in quicksand. I've seen it once or twice and——"

Sheila shuddered and covered her face with her hands, for his words had set her imagination to working.

"Oh!" she said and became silent.

Dakota stood for a moment, watching her, his face grim with sympathy.

"It's too bad," he said finally. "I don't like to shoot him, any more than you want to see it done. I reckon, though, that the pony would thank me for doing it if he could have anything to say about it." He walked over close to her, speaking in a low voice. "You can't stay here, of course. You'll have to take my horse, and you'll have to go right now, if you don't want to be around when the pony——"

"Please don't," she said, interrupting him. He relapsed into silence, and stood gravely watching her as she resumed her toilet.

She disliked to accept his offer of the pony, but there seemed to be no other way. She certainly could not walk to the Double R ranchhouse, even to satisfy a desire to

show him that she would not allow him to place her under any obligation to him.

"I've got to tell you one thing," he said presently, standing erect and looking earnestly at her. "If Duncan is responsible for your safety in this country he isn't showing very good judgment in letting you run around alone. There are dangers that you know nothing about, and you don't know a thing about the country. Someone ought to take care of you."

"As you did, for example," she retorted, filled with anger over his present solicitation for her welfare, as contrasted to his treatment of her on another occasion.

A slow red filled his cheeks. Evidently he did possess *some* self-respect, after all. Contrition, too, she thought she could detect in his manner and in his voice.

"But I didn't hurt you, anyway," he said, eyeing her steadily.

"Not if you call ruining a woman's name not 'hurting' her," she answered bitterly.

"I am sorry for that, Miss Sheila," he said earnestly. "I had an idea that night—and still have it, for that matter—that I was

an instrument— Well, I had an idea, that's all. But I haven't told anybody about what happened—I haven't even hinted it to anybody. And I told the parson to get out of the country, so he wouldn't do any gassing about it. And I haven't been over to Dry Bottom to have the marriage recorded—and I am not going to go. So that you can have it set aside at any time."

Yes, she could have the marriage annulled, she knew that. But the contemplation of her release from the tie that bound her to him did not lessen the gravity of the offense in her eyes. She told herself that she hated him with a remorseless passion which would never cease until he ceased to live. No action of his could repair the damage he had done to her. She told him so, plainly.

"I didn't know you were so blood-thirsty as that," he laughed in quiet mockery. "Maybe it would be a good thing for you if I did die—or get killed. But I'm not allowing that I'm ready to die yet, and certainly am not going to let anybody kill me if I can prevent it. I reckon you're not thinking of doing the killing yourself?"

"If I told my father—" she began, but hesitated when she saw his lips suddenly straighten and harden and his eyes light with a deep contempt.

"So you haven't told your father?" he laughed. "I was sure you had taken him into your confidence by this time. But I reckon it's a mighty good thing that you didn't—for your father. Like as not if you'd tell him he'd get some riled and come right over to see me, yearning for my blood. And then I'd have to shoot him up some. And that would sure be too bad—you loving him as you do."

"I suppose you would shoot him like you shot that poor fellow in Lazette," she taunted, bitterly.

"Like I did that poor fellow in Lazette," he said, with broad, ironic emphasis. "You saw me shoot Blanca, of course, for you were there. But you don't know what made me shoot him, and I am not going to tell you—it's none of your business."

"Indeed!" Her voice was burdened with contempt. "I suppose you take a certain pride in your ability to murder people."

She placed a venomous accent on the "Murder."

"Lots of people ought to be murdered," he drawled, using the accent she had used.

Her contempt of him grew. "Then I presume you have others in mind—whom you will shoot when the mood strikes you?" she said.

"Perhaps." His smile was mysterious and mocking, and she saw in his eyes the reckless gleam which she had noted that night while in the cabin with him. She shuddered and walked to the pony—his pony.

"If you have quite finished I believe I will be going," she said, holding her chin high and averting her face. "I will have one of the men bring your horse to you."

"I believe I have quite finished," he returned, mimicking her cold, precise manner of speech.

She disdainfully refused his proffer of assistance and mounted the pony. He stood watching her with a smile, which she saw by glancing covertly at him while pretending to arrange the stirrup strap. When she started to ride away without even glancing

at him, she heard his voice, with its absurd, hateful drawl:

“And she didn’t even thank me,” he said with mock bitterness and disappointment.

She turned and made a grimace at him. He bowed and smiled.

“You are entirely welcome,” she said.

He was standing on the edge of the quicksand, watching her, when she reached the long rise upon which she had sat on her pony on a day some weeks before, and when she turned he waved a hand to her. A little later she vanished over the rise, and she had not ridden very far when she heard the dull report of his pistol. She shivered, and rode on.

CHAPTER VIII

SHEILA FANS A FLAME

SHEILA departed from the quicksand crossing nursing her wrath against the man who had rescued her, feeling bitterly vindictive against him, yet aware that the Dakota who had saved her life was not the Dakota whom she had feared during her adventure with him in his cabin on the night of her arrival in the country. He had changed, and though she assured herself that she despised him more than ever, she found a grim amusement in the recollection of his manner immediately following the rescue, and in a review of the verbal battle, in which she had been badly worsted.

His glances had had in them the quality of inward mirth and satisfaction which is most irritating, and behind his pretended remorse she could see a pleasure over her dilemma which made her yearn to inflict

punishment upon him that would cause him to ask for mercy. His demeanor had said plainly that if she wished to have the marriage set aside all well and good—he would offer no objection. But neither would he take the initiative. Decidedly, it was a matter in which she should consult her own desires.

It was late in the afternoon when she rode up to the Double R corral gates and was met there by her father and Duncan. Langford had been worried, he said, and was much concerned over her appearance. In the presence of Duncan Sheila told him the story of her danger and subsequent rescue by Dakota and she saw his eyes narrow with a strange light.

“Dakota!” he said. “Isn’t that the chap who shot that half-breed over in Lazette the day I came?”

To Sheila’s nod he ejaculated: “He’s a trump!”

“He is a brute!” As the words escaped her lips—she had not meant to utter them—Sheila caught a glint in Duncan’s eyes which told her that she had echoed the latter’s sen-

timents, and she felt almost like retracting the charge. She had to bite her lips to resist the impulse.

“A brute, eh?” laughed Langford. “It strikes me that I wouldn’t so characterize a man who had saved my life. The chances are that after saving you he didn’t seem delighted enough, or he didn’t smile to suit you, or——”

“He ain’t so awful much of a man,” remarked Duncan disparagingly.

Langford turned and looked at Duncan with a comprehending smile. “Evidently you owe Dakota nothing, my dear Duncan,” he said.

The latter’s face darkened, and with Sheila listening he told the story of the calf deal, which had indirectly brought about the death of Blanca.

“For a long time we had suspected Texas Blanca of rustling,” said Duncan, “but we couldn’t catch him with the goods. Five years ago, after the spring round-up, I branded a bunch of calves with a secret mark, and then we rode sign on Blanca.

“We had him then, for the calves disap-

peared and some of the boys found some of them in Blanca's corral, but we delayed, hoping he would run off more, and while we were waiting he sold out to Dakota. We didn't know that at the time; didn't find it out until we went over to take Blanca and found Dakota living in his cabin. He had a bill of sale from Blanca all right, showing that he'd bought the calves from him. It looked regular, but we had our doubts, and Dakota and me came pretty near having a run-in. If the boys hadn't interfered——"

He hesitated and looked at Sheila, and as her gaze met his steadily his eyes wavered and a slow red came into his face, for the recollection of what had actually occurred at the meeting between him and Dakota was not pleasant, and since that day Duncan had many times heard the word "Yellow" spoken in connection with his name—which meant that he lacked courage.

"So he wasn't a rustler, after all?" said Sheila pleasantly. For some reason which she could not entirely explain, she suspected that Duncan had left many things out of his story of his clash with Dakota.

"Well, no," admitted Duncan grudgingly.

Sheila was surprised at the satisfaction she felt over this admission. Perhaps Duncan read her face as she had read his, for he frowned.

"Him and Blanca framed up—making believe that Blanca had sold him the Star brand," he said venomously.

"I don't believe it!" Sheila's eyes met Duncan's and the latter's wavered. She was not certain which gave her the thrill she felt—her defense of Dakota or Duncan's bitter rage over the exhibition of that defense.

"He doesn't appear to me to be the sort of man who would steal cows," she said with a smile which made Duncan's teeth show. "Although," she continued significantly, "it does seem that he is the sort of man I would not care to trifle with—if I were a man. You told me yourself, if you remember, that you were not taking any chances with him. And now you accuse him. If I were you," she warned, "I would be more careful—I would keep from saying things which I could not prove."

“Meaning that I’m afraid of him, I reckon?” sneered Duncan.

Sheila looked at him, her eyes alight with mischief. That day on the edge of the butte overlooking the river, when Duncan had talked about Dakota, she had detected in his manner an inclination to belittle the latter; several times since then she had heard him speak venomously of him, and she had suspected that all was not smooth between them. And now since Duncan had related the story of the calf incident she was certain that the relations between the two men were strained to the point of open rupture. Duncan had bothered her, had annoyed her with his attentions, had adopted toward her an air of easy familiarity, which she had deeply resented, and she yearned to humiliate him deeply.

“Afraid?” She appeared to hesitate. “Well, no,” she said, surveying him with an appraising eye in which the mischief was partly concealed, “I do not believe that you are afraid. Perhaps you are merely careful where he is concerned. But I am certain that even if you were afraid of him you

would not refuse to take his pony back. I promised to send it back, you know."

A deep red suddenly suffused Duncan's face. A sharp, savage gleam in his eyes—which Sheila met with a disarming smile—convinced her that he was aware of her object. She saw also that he did not intend to allow her to force him to perform the service.

He bowed and regarded her with a shallow smile.

"I will have one of the boys take the pony over to him the first thing in the morning," he said.

Sheila smiled sweetly. "Please don't bother," she said. "I wouldn't think of allowing one of the men to take the pony back. Perhaps I shall decide to ride over that way myself. I should not care to have you meet Dakota if you are afraid of him."

Her rippling laugh caused the red in Duncan's face to deepen, but she gave him no time to reply, for directly she had spoken she turned and walked toward the ranch-house. Both Duncan and Langford watched her until she had vanished, and then Langford turned to Duncan.

"What on earth have you done to her?" he questioned.

But Duncan was savagely pulling the saddle from Dakota's pony and did not answer.

Sheila really had no expectation of prevailing upon Duncan to return Dakota's horse, and had she anticipated that the manager would accept her challenge she would not have given it, for after thinking over the incident of her rescue she had come to the conclusion that she had not treated Dakota fairly, and by personally taking his horse to him she would have an opportunity to proffer her tardy thanks for his service. She did not revert to the subject of the animal's return during the evening meal, however, nor after it when she and her father and Duncan sat on the gallery of the ranchhouse enjoying the cool of the night breezes.

After breakfast on the following morning she was standing near the windmill, watching the long arms travel lazily in their wide circles, when she saw Duncan riding away from the ranchhouse, leading Dakota's pony. She started toward the corral gates, intending to call to him to return, but

thought better of the impulse and hailed him tauntingly instead:

"Please tell him to accept my thanks," she said, and Duncan turned his head, bowed mockingly, and continued on his way.

Half an hour after the departure of Duncan Sheila pressed a loafing puncher into service and directed him to rope a gentle pony for her. After the puncher had secured a suitable appearing animal and had placed a saddle and bridle on it, she compelled him to ride it several times around the confines of the pasture to make certain that it would not "buck." Then she mounted and rode up the river.

Duncan was not particularly pleased over his errand, and many times while he rode the trail toward Dakota's cabin his lips moved from his teeth in a snarl. Following the incident of the theft of the calves by Blanca, Duncan had taken pains to insinuate publicly that Dakota's purchase of the Star from the half-breed had been a clever ruse to avert suspicion, intimating that a partnership existed between Dakota and Blanca. The shooting of Blanca by Dakota, however, had

exploded this charge, and until now Duncan had been very careful to avoid a meeting with the man whom he had maligned.

During the night he had given much thought to the circumstance which was sending him to meet his enemy. He had a suspicion that Sheila had purposely taunted him with cowardice—that in all probability Dakota himself had suggested the plan in order to force a meeting with him. This thought suggested another. Sheila's defense of Dakota seemed to indicate that a certain intimacy existed between them. He considered this carefully, and with a throb of jealousy concluded that Dakota's action in saving Sheila's life would very likely pave the way for a closer acquaintance.

Certainly, in spite of Sheila's remark about Dakota being a "brute," she had betrayed evidence of admiration for the man. In that case her veiled allusions to his own fear of meeting Dakota were very likely founded on something which Dakota had told her, and certainly anything which Dakota might have said about him would not be complimentary. Therefore his rage

against both Sheila and his enemy was bitter when he finally rode up to the door of the latter's cabin.

There was hope in his heart that Dakota might prove to be absent, and when, after calling once and receiving no answer, he dismounted and hitched Dakota's pony to a rail of the corral fence, there was a smile of satisfaction on his face.

He took plenty of time to hitch the pony; he even lingered at the corral bars, leaning on them to watch several steers which were inside the enclosure. He found time, too, in spite of his fear of his enemy, to sneer over the evidences of prosperity which were on every hand. He was congratulating himself on his good fortune in reaching Dakota's cabin during a time when the latter was absent, when he heard a slight sound behind him. He turned rapidly, to see Dakota standing in the doorway of the cabin, watching him with cold, level eyes, one of his heavy six-shooters in hand.

Duncan's face went slowly pale. He did not speak at once and when he did he was surprised at his hoarseness.

"I've brought your cayuse back," he said finally.

"So I see," returned Dakota. His eyes glinted with a cold humor, though they were still regarding Duncan with an alertness which the other could not mistake.

"So I see," repeated Dakota. His slow drawl was in evidence again. "I don't recollect, though, that I sent word to have *you* bring him back."

"I wasn't tickled to death over the job," returned Duncan.

Now that his first surprise was over and Dakota had betrayed no sign of resenting his visit, Duncan felt easier. There had been a slight sneer in his voice when he answered.

"That isn't surprising," returned Dakota. "There never was a time when you were tickled a heap to stick your nose into my affairs." His smile froze Duncan.

"I ain't looking for trouble," said the latter, with a perfect knowledge of Dakota's peculiar expression.

"Then why did you come over here? I reckon there wasn't anyone else to send my

horse over by?" said Dakota, his voice coming with a truculent snap.

Duncan flushed. "Sheila Langford sent me," he admitted reluctantly.

Dakota's eyes lighted with incredulity. "I reckon you're a liar," he said with cold emphasis.

Duncan's gaze went to the pistol in Dakota's hand and his lips curled. He knew that he was perfectly safe so long as he made no hostile move, for in spite of his derogatory remarks about the man he was aware that he never used his weapons without provocation.

Therefore he forced a smile. "You ain't running no Blanca deal on me," he said. "Calling me a liar ain't going to get no rise out of me. But she sent me, just the same. I reckon, liking you as I do, that I ought to be glad she gave me the chance to come over and see you, but I ain't. We was gassing about you and she told me I was scared to bring your cayuse back." He laughed mirthlessly. "I reckon I've proved that I ain't any scared."

"No," said Dakota with a cold grin, "you ain't scared. You know that there

won't be any shooting done unless you get careless with that gun you carry." His eyes were filled with a whimsical humor, but they were still alert, as he watched Duncan's face for signs of insincerity. He saw no such signs and his expression became mocking. "So she sent you over here?" he said, and his was the voice of one enemy enjoying some subtle advantage over another. "Why, I reckon you're a kind of handy man to have around—sort of ladies' man—running errands and such."

Duncan's face bloated with anger, but he dared not show open resentment. For behind Dakota's soft voice and gentle, overpolite manner, he felt the deep rancor for whose existence he alone was responsible. So, trying to hold his passions in check, he grinned at Dakota, significantly, insinuatingly, unable finally to keep the bitter hatred and jealousy out of his voice. For in the evilness of his mind he had drawn many imaginary pictures of what had occurred between Dakota and Sheila immediately after her rescue by the latter.

"I reckon," he said hoarsely, "that you take a heap of interest in Sheila."

"That's part of your business, I suppose?" Dakota's voice was suddenly hard.

Duncan had decided to steer carefully away from any trouble with Dakota; he had even decided that as a measure for his own safety he must say nothing which would be likely to arouse Dakota's anger, but the jealous thoughts in his mind had finally gotten the better of prudence, and the menace in Dakota's voice angered him.

"I reckon," he said with a sneer, "that I ain't as much interested in her as you are."

He started back, his lips tightening over his teeth in a snarl of alarm and fear, for Dakota had stepped down from the doorway and was at his side, his eyes narrowed with cold wrath.

"Meaning what?" he demanded harshly, sharply, for he imagined that perhaps Sheila had told of her marriage to him, and the thought that Duncan should have been selected by her to share the secret maddened him.

"Meaning what, you damned coyote?" he insisted, stepping closer to Duncan.

"Meaning that she ain't admiring you

for nothing," flared Duncan incautiously, his jealousy overcoming his better judgment. "Meaning that any woman which has been pulled out of a quicksand like you pulled her out might be expected to favor you with——"

The sunlight flashed on Dakota's pistol as it leaped from his right hand to his left and was holstered with a jerk. And with the same motion his clenched fist was jammed with savage force against Duncan's lips, cutting short the slanderous words and sending him in a heap to the dust of the corral yard.

With a cry of rage Duncan grasped for his pistol and drew it out, but the hand holding it was stamped violently into the earth, the arm bent and twisted until the fingers released the weapon. And then Dakota stood over him, looking down at him with narrowed, chilling eyes, his face white and hard, his anger gone as quickly as it had come. He said no word while Duncan clambered awkwardly to his feet and mounted his horse.

"I'm telling you something," he said

quietly, as Duncan lifted the reins with his uninjured hand, turning his horse to depart. "You and me have never hitched very well and there isn't any chance of us ever falling on each other's necks. I think what I've done to you about squares us for that calf deal. I've been yearning to hand you something before you left the country, but I didn't expect you'd give me the chance in just this way. I'm warning you that the next time you shove your coyote nose into my business I'll muss it up some. That applies to Miss Sheila. If I ever hear of you getting her name on your dirty tongue again I'll tear you apart. I reckon that's all." He drew his pistol and balanced it in his right hand. "It makes me feel some reckless to be talking to you," he added, a glint of intolerance in his eyes. "You'd better travel before I change my mind.

"You don't need to mention this to Miss Sheila," he said mockingly, as Duncan urged his horse away from the corral gate; "just let her go on—thinking you're a man."

CHAPTER IX

STRICTLY BUSINESS

FOR two or three quiet weeks Sheila did not see much of Duncan, and her father bothered her very little. Several nights on the gallery of the ranchhouse she had seen the two men sitting very close together, and on one or two occasions she had overheard scraps of conversation carried on between them in which Doubler's name was mentioned.

She remembered Doubler as one of the nesters whom Duncan had mentioned that day on the butte overlooking the river, and though her father and Duncan had a perfect right to discuss him, it seemed to Sheila that there had been a serious note in their voices when they had mentioned his name.

She had become acquainted with Doubler. Since discontinuing her rides with her father and Duncan she had gone out every day

alone, though she was careful to avoid any crossing in the river which looked the least suspicious. Such crossings as she could ford were few, and for that reason she was forced to ride most of the time to the Two Forks, where there was an excellent shallow, with long slopes sweeping up to the plains on both sides.

The first time that she crossed at the Two Forks she had come upon a small adobe cabin situated a few hundred yards back from the water's edge.

Sheila would have fled from the vicinity, for there was still fresh in her mind a recollection of another cabin in which she had once passed many fearsome hours, but while she hesitated, on the verge of flight, Doubler came to the door, and when she saw that he was an old man with a kindly face, much of her perturbation vanished, and she remained to talk.

Doubler was hospitable and solicitous and supplied her with some soda biscuit and fresh beef and a tin cup full of delicious coffee. She refused to enter the cabin, and so he brought the food out to her and sat on the

step beside her while she ate, betraying much interest in her.

Doubler asked no questions regarding her identity, and Sheila marveled much over this. But when she prepared to depart she understood why he had betrayed no curiosity concerning her.

"I reckon you're that Langford girl?" he said.

"Yes," returned Sheila, wondering. "I am Sheila Langford. But who told you? I was not aware that anyone around here knew me—except the people at the Double R."

"Dakota told me."

"Oh!" A chill came into her voice which instantly attracted Doubler's attention. He looked at her with an odd smile.

"You know Dakota?"

"I have met him."

"You don't like him, I reckon?"

"No."

"Well, now," commented Doubler, "I reckon I've got things mixed. But from Dakota's talk I took it that you an' him was pretty thick."

"His talk?" Sheila remembered Dakota's statement that he had told no one of their relations. So he *had* been talking, after all! She was not surprised, but she was undeniably angry and embarrassed to think that perhaps all the time she had been talking to Doubler he might have been appraising her on the basis of her adventure with Dakota.

"What has he been saying?" she demanded coldly.

"Nothing, ma'am. That is, nothin' which any man wouldn't say about you, once he'd seen you an' talked some to you." Doubler surveyed her with sparkling, appreciative eyes.

"As a rule it don't pay to go to gossipin' with anyone—least of all with a woman. But I reckon I can tell you what he said, ma'am, without you gettin' awful mad. He didn't say nothin' except that he'd taken an awful shine to you. An' he'd likely make things mighty unpleasant for me if he'd find that I'd told you that."

"Shine?" There was a world of scornful wonder in Sheila's voice. "Would you

mind telling me what 'taking a shine' to anyone means?"

"Why, no, I reckon I don't mind, ma'am, seein' that it's you. 'Takin' a shine' to you means that he's some stuck on you—likes you, that is. An' I reckon you can't blame him much for doin' that."

Sheila did not answer, though a sudden flood of red to her face made the use of mere words entirely unnecessary so far as Doubler was concerned, for he smiled wisely.

Sheila fled down the trail toward the crossing without a parting word to Doubler, leaving him standing at the door squinting with amusement at her. But on the morrow she had returned, determined to discover something of Dakota, to learn something of his history since coming into the country, or at the least to see if she could not induce Doubler to disclose his real name.

She was unsuccessful. Dakota had never taken Doubler into his confidence, and the information that she succeeded in worming from the nester was not more than he had already volunteered, or than Duncan had given her that day when they were seated

on the edge of the butte overlooking the river.

She was convinced that Doubler had told her all he knew, and she wondered at the custom which permitted friendship on the basis of such meager knowledge.

She quickly grew to like Doubler. He showed a fatherly interest in her and always greeted her with a smile when during her rides she came to his cabin, or when she met him, as she did frequently, on the open range. His manner toward her was always cordial, and he seemed not to have a care. One morning, however, she rode up to the door of the cabin and Doubler's face was serious. He stood quietly in the doorway, watching her as she sat on her pony, not offering to assist her down as he usually did, and she knew instantly that something had happened to disturb his peace of mind. He did not invite her into the cabin.

"Ma'am," he said, and Sheila detected regret in his voice, "I'm a heap sorry, but of course you won't be comin' here any more."

"I don't see why!" returned Sheila in

surprise. "I like to come here. But, of course, if you don't want me——"

"It ain't that," he interrupted quickly. "I thought you knowed. But you don't, of course, or you wouldn't have come just now. Your dad an' Duncan was over to see me yesterday."

"I didn't know that," returned Sheila. "But I can't see why a visit from father should——"

"He's wantin' me to pull my freight out of the country," said Doubler. "An' of course I ain't doin' it. Therefore I'm severin' diplomatic relations with your family."

"I don't see why——" began Sheila, puzzled to understand why a mere visit on her father's part should have the result Doubler had announced.

"Of course you don't," Doubler told her. "You're a woman an' don't understand such things. But in this country when a little owner has got some land which a big owner wants—an' can't buy—there's likely to be trouble. I ain't proved on my land yet, an' if your dad can run me off he'll be pretty apt to grab it somehow or other. But

he ain't runnin' me off an' so there's a heap of trouble comin'. An' of course while there's trouble you won't be comin' here any more after this. Likely your dad wouldn't have it. I'm sorry, too. I like you a lot."

"I don't see why father should want your land," Sheila told him gravely, much disturbed at this unexpected development. "There is plenty of land here." She swept a hand toward the plains.

"There ain't enough for some people," grimly laughed Doubler. "Some people is hawks—askin' your pardon, ma'am. I wasn't expectin' your father to be like that, after seein' you. I was hopin' that we'd be able to get along. I've had some trouble with Duncan—not very long ago. Once I had to speak pretty plain to him. I expect he's been fillin' your dad up."

"I'll see father about it." Sheila's face was red with a pained embarrassment. "I am sure that father will not make any trouble for you—he isn't that kind of man."

"He's that kind of a man, sure enough," said Doubler gravely. "I reckon I've got him sized up right. He ain't in no way like

you, ma'am. If you hadn't told me I reckon I wouldn't have knowed he is your father."

"He is my stepfather," admitted Sheila.

"I knowed it!" declared Doubler. "I'm too old to be fooled by what I see in a man's face—or in a woman's face either. Don't you go to say anything about this business to him. He's bound to try to run me off. He done said so. I don't know when I ever heard a man talk any meaner than he did. Said that if I didn't sell he'd make things mighty unpleasant for me. An' so I reckon there's goin' to be some fun."

Sheila did not remain long at Doubler's cabin, for her mind was in a riot of rage and resentment against her father for his attitude toward Doubler, and she cut short her ride in the hope of being able to have a talk with him before he left the ranchhouse. But when she returned she was told by Duncan's sister that Langford had departed some hours before—alone. He had not mentioned his destination.

.

Ben Doubler had omitted an important detail from his story of Langford's visit to

his cabin, for he had not cared to frighten Sheila unnecessarily. But as Langford rode toward Doubler's cabin this morning his thoughts persisted in dwelling on Doubler's final words to him, spoken as he and Duncan had turned their horses to leave the nester's cabin the day before:

“If it's goin' to be war, Langford, it ain't goin' to be no pussy-kitten affair. I'm warnin' you to stay away from the Two Forks. If I ketch you or any of your men nosin' around there I'm goin' to bore you some rapid.”

Langford had sneered then, and he sneered now as he rode toward the river, for he had no doubt that Doubler had uttered the threat in a spirit of bravado. Of course, he told himself as he rode, the man was forced to say something, but the idea of him being serious in the threat to shoot any one who came to the Two Forks was ridiculous.

All his life Langford had heard threats from the lips of his victims, and thus far they had remained only threats. He had determined to see Doubler this morning, for

he had noticed that the nester had appeared ill at ease in the presence of Duncan, and he anticipated that alone he could force him to accept terms. When he reached the crossing at Two Forks he urged his pony through its waters, his face wearing a confident smile.

There was an open stretch of grass land between the crossing and Doubler's cabin, and when Langford urged his pony up the sloping bank of the river he saw the nester standing near the door of the cabin, watching. Langford was about to force his pony to a faster pace, when he saw Doubler raise a rifle to his shoulder. Still, he continued to ride forward, but he pulled the pony up shortly when he saw the flame spurt from the muzzle of the rifle and heard the shrill hiss of the bullet as it passed dangerously near to him.

No words were needed, and neither man spoke any. Without stopping to give Doubler an opportunity to speak, Langford wheeled his pony, and with a white, scared face, bending low over the animal's mane to escape any bullets which might fol-

low the first, rapidly recrossed the river. Once on the crest of the hill on the opposite side he turned, and trembling with rage and fear, shook a clenched hand at Doubler. The latter's reply was a strident laugh.

Langford returned to the ranchouse, riding slowly, though in his heart was a riot of rage and hatred against the nester. It was war, to be sure. But now that Doubler had shown in no unmistakable manner that he had not been trifling the day before, Langford was no longer in doubt as to the method he would have to employ in his attempt to gain possession of his land. Doubler, he felt, had made the choice.

The ride to the ranchouse took long, but by the time Langford arrived there he had regained his composure, saying nothing to anyone concerning his adventure.

For three days he kept his own counsel, riding out alone, taciturn, giving much thought to the situation. Sheila had intended to speak to him regarding the trouble with Doubler, but his manner repulsed her and she kept silent, hoping that the mood would pass. However, the mood did not

pass. Langford continued to ride out alone, maintaining a moody silence, sitting alone much with his own thoughts and allowing no one to break down the barrier of taciturnity which he had erected.

On the morning of the fifth day after his adventure with Doubler he was sitting on the ranchhouse gallery with Duncan, enjoying an after-breakfast cigar, when he said casually to the latter:

"I take it that folks in this country are mighty careless with their weapons."

Duncan grinned. "You might call it careless," he returned. "No doubt there are people—people who come out here from the East—who think that a man who carries a gun out here is careless with it. But I reckon that when a man draws a gun here he draws it with a pretty definite purpose."

"I have heard," continued Langford slowly, "that there are men in this country who do not hesitate to kill other people for money."

"Meaning that there are road agents and such?" questioned Duncan.

"Naturally, that particular kind would

be included. I meant, however another kind—I believe they are called ‘bad men,’ are they not? Men who kill for hire?”

Duncan cast a furtive glance at Langford out of the corners of his eyes, but could draw no conclusions concerning the latter’s motive in asking the question from the expression of his face.

“Such men drift in occasionally,” he returned, convinced that Langford’s curiosity was merely casual—as Langford desired him to consider it. “Usually, though, they don’t stay long.”

“I suppose there are none of that breed around here—in Lazette, for instance. It struck me that Dakota was extraordinarily handy with a gun.”

He puffed long at his cigar and saw that, though Duncan did not answer, his face had grown suddenly dark with passion, as it always did when Dakota’s name was mentioned. Langford smiled subtly. “I suppose,” he said, “that Dakota might be called a bad man.”

Duncan’s eyes flashed with venom. “I reckon Dakota’s nothing but a damned

sneak!" he said, not being able to conceal the bitterness in his voice.

Langford did not allow his smile to be seen; he had not forgotten the incident of the returning of Dakota's horse by Duncan.

"He's a dead shot, though," he suggested.

"I'm allowing that," grudgingly returned Duncan. "And," he added, "it's been hinted that all his shooting scrapes haven't been on the level."

"He is not straight, then?" said Langford, his eyes gleaming. "Not 'square,' as you say in this country?"

"I reckon there ain't nothing square about him," returned Duncan, glad of an opportunity to defame his enemy.

Again Langford did not allow Duncan to see his smile, and he deftly directed the current of the conversation into other channels.

He rode out again that day, taking the river trail and passing Dakota's cabin, but Dakota himself was nowhere to be seen and at dusk Langford returned to the Double R. During the evening meal he enveloped himself with a silence which proved impenetrable. He retired early, to Duncan's sur-

prise, and the next morning, without announcing his plans to anyone, saddled his pony and rode away toward the river trail.

He took a circuitous route to reach it, riding slowly, with the air and manner of a man who is thinking deep thoughts, smiling much, though many times grimly.

"Dakota isn't square," he said once aloud during one of his grim smiles.

When he came to the quicksand crossing he halted and examined the earth in the vicinity, smiling more broadly at the marks and hoof prints in the hard sand near the water's edge. Then he rode on.

Two or three miles from the quicksand crossing he came suddenly upon Dakota's cabin. Dakota himself was repairing a saddle in the shade of the cabin wall, and for all that Langford could see he was entirely unaware of his approach. He saw Dakota look up when he passed the corral gate, and when he reached a point about twenty feet distant he observed a faint smile on Dakota's face.

"Howdy, stranger," came the latter's voice.

"How are you, my friend?" greeted Langford easily.

It was not hard for Langford to adopt an air of familiarity toward the man who had figured prominently in his thoughts during a great many of the previous twenty-four hours. He dismounted from his pony, hitched the animal to a rail of the corral fence, and approached Dakota, standing in front of him and looking down at him with a smile.

Dakota apparently took little interest in his visitor, for keeping his seat on the box upon which he had been sitting when Langford had first caught sight of him, he continued to give his attention to the saddle.

"I'm from the Double R," offered Langford, feeling slightly less important, conscious that somehow the familiarity that he had felt existed between them a moment before was a singularly fleeting thing.

"I noticed that," responded Dakota, still busy with his saddle.

"How?"

"I reckon that you've forgot that your horse has got a brand on him?"

"You've got keen eyes, my friend," laughed Langford.

"Have I?" Dakota had not looked at Langford until now, and as he spoke he raised his head and gazed fairly into the latter's eyes.

For a moment neither man moved or spoke. It seemed to Langford, as he gazed into the steely, fathomless blue of the eyes which held his—held them, for now as he looked it was the first time in his life that his gaze had met a fellow being's steadily—that he could see there an unmistakable, grim mockery. And that was all, for whatever other emotions Dakota felt, they were invisible to Langford. He drew a deep breath, suddenly aware that before him was a man exactly like himself in one respect—skilled in the art of keeping his emotions to himself. Langford had not met many such men; usually he was able to see clear through a man—able to read him. But this man he could not read. He was puzzled and embarrassed over the discovery. His gaze finally wavered; he looked away.

"A man don't have to have such terribly

keen eyes to be able to see a brand," observed Dakota, drawling; "especially when he's passed a whole lot of his time looking at brands."

"That's so," agreed Langford. "I suppose you have been a cowboy a long time."

"Longer than you've been a ranch owner."

Langford looked quickly at Dakota, for now the latter was again busy with his saddle, but he could detect no sarcasm in his face, though plainly there had been a subtle quality of it in his voice.

"Then you know me?" he said.

"No. I don't know you. I've put two and two together. I heard that Duncan was selling the Double R. I've seen your daughter. And you ride up here on a Double R horse. There ain't no other strangers in the country. Then, of course, you're the new owner of the Double R."

Langford looked again at the inscrutable face of the man beside him and felt a sudden deep respect for him. Even if he had not witnessed the killing of Texas Blanca that day in Lazette he would have known the

man before him for what he was—a quiet, cool, self-possessed man of much experience, who could not be trifled with.

“That’s right,” he admitted; “I am the new owner of the Double R. And I have come, my friend, to thank you for what you did for my daughter.”

“She told you, then?” Dakota’s gaze was again on Langford, an odd light in his eyes.

“Certainly.”

“She’s told you what?”

“How you rescued her from the quicksand.”

Dakota’s gaze was still on his visitor, quiet, intent. “She tell you anything else?” he questioned slowly.

“Why, what else is there to tell?” There was sincere curiosity in Langford’s voice, for Sheila had always told him everything that happened to her. It was not like her to keep anything secret from him.

“Did she tell you that she forgot to thank me for saving her?” There was a queer smile on Dakota’s lips, a peculiar, pleased glint in his eyes.

"No, she neglected to relate that," returned Langford.

"Forgot it. That's what I thought. Do you think she forgot it intentionally?"

"It wouldn't be like her."

"Of course not. And so she's sent *you* over to thank me! Tell her no thanks are due. And if she inquires, tell her that the pony didn't make a sound or a struggle when I shot him."

"As it happens, she didn't send me," smiled Langford. "There was the excitement, of course, and I presume she forgot to thank you—possibly will ride over herself some day to thank you personally. But she didn't send me—I came without her knowledge."

"To thank me—for her?"

"No."

"You're visiting then. Or maybe just riding around to look at your range. Sit down." He motioned to another box that stood near the door of the cabin.

Once Langford became seated Dakota again busied himself with the saddle, ignoring his visitor. Langford shifted uneasily

on the box, for the seat was not to his liking and the attitude of his host was most peculiar. He fell silent also and kicked gravely and absently into a hummock with the toe of his boot.

Singularly enough, a plan which had taken form in his mind since Doubler had shot at him seemed suddenly to have many defects, though until now it had seemed complete enough. Out of the jumble of thoughts that had rioted in his brain after his departure from Two Forks crossing had risen a conviction. Doubler was a danger and a menace and must be removed. And there was no legal way to remove him, for though he had not proved on his land he was entitled to it to the limit set by the law, or until his death.

Langford's purpose in questioning Duncan had been to learn of the presence of someone in the country who would not be averse to removing Doubler. The possibility of disposing of the nester in this manner had been before him ever since he had learned of his presence on the Two Forks. He had not been surprised when Duncan

had mentioned Dakota as being a probable tool, for he had thought over the occurrence of the shooting in Lazette many times, and had been much impressed with Dakota's coolness and his satanic cleverness with a six-shooter, and it seemed that it would be a simple matter to arrange with him for the removal of Doubler. Yes, it had seemed simple enough when he had planned it, and when Duncan had told him that Dakota was not on the "square."

But now, looking covertly at the man, he found that he was not quite certain in spite of what Duncan had said. He had mentally worked out his plan of approaching Dakota many times. But now the defect in the plan seemed to be that he had misjudged his man—that Duncan had misjudged him. Plainly he would make a mistake were he to approach Dakota with a bald request for the removing of the nester—he must clothe it. Thus, after a long silence, he started obliquely.

"My friend," he said, "it must be lonesome out here for you."

"Not so lonesome."

"It's a big country, though—lots of land. There seems to be no end to it."

"That's right, there's plenty of it. I reckon the Lord wasn't in a stingy mood when he made it."

"Yet there seem to be restrictions even here."

"Restrictions?"

"Yes," laughed Langford; "restrictions on a man's desires."

Dakota looked at him with a saturnine smile. "Restrictions on a man's desires," he repeated slowly. Then he laughed mirthlessly. "Some people wouldn't be satisfied if they owned the whole earth. They'd be wanting the sun, moon, and stars thrown in for good measure."

Langford laughed again. "That's human nature, my friend," he contended, determined not to be forced to digress from the main subject. "Have you got everything you want? Isn't there anything besides what you already have that appeals to you? Have you no ambition?"

"There are plenty of things I want. Maybe I'd be modest, though, if I had

ambition. We all want a lot of things which we can't get."

"Correct, my friend. Some of us want money, others desire happiness, still others are after something else. As you say, some of use are never satisfied—the ambitious ones."

"Then you are ambitious?"

"You've struck it," smiled Langford.

Dakota caught his gaze, and there was a smile of derision on his lips. "What particular thing are *you* looking for?" he questioned.

"Land."

"Mine?" Dakota's lips curled a little. "Doubler's, then," he added as Langford shook his head with an emphatic, negative motion. "He's the only man who's got land near yours."

"That's correct," admitted Langford; "I want Doubler's land."

There was a silence for a few minutes, while Langford watched Dakota furtively as the latter gave his entire attention to his saddle.

"You've got all the rest of those things

you spoke about, then—happiness, money, and such?” said Dakota presently, in a low voice.

“Yes. I am pretty well off there.”

“All you want is Doubler’s land?” He stopped working with the saddle and looked at Langford. “I reckon, if you’ve got all those things, that you ought to be satisfied. But of course you ain’t satisfied, or you wouldn’t want Doubler’s land. Did you offer to buy it?”

“I asked him to name his own figure, and he wouldn’t sell—wouldn’t even consider selling, though I offered him what I considered a fair price.”

“That’s odd, isn’t it? You’d naturally think that money could buy everything. But maybe Doubler has found happiness on his land. You couldn’t buy that from a man, you know. I suppose you care a lot about Doubler’s happiness — you wouldn’t want to take his land if you knew he was happy on it? Or don’t it make any difference to you?” There was faint sarcasm in his voice.

“As it happens,” said Langford, reddening.

ing a little, "this isn't a question of happiness—it is merely business. Doubler's land adjoins mine. I want to extend my holdings. I can't extend in Doubler's direction because Doubler controls the water rights. Therefore it is my business to see that Doubler gets out."

"And sentiment has got no place in business. That right? It doesn't make any difference to you that Doubler doesn't want to sell; you want his land, and that settles it—so far as you are concerned. You don't consider Doubler's feelings. Well, I don't know but that's the way things are run—one man keeps what he can and another gets what he is able to get. What are you figuring to do about Doubler?"

Langford glanced at Dakota with an oily, significant smile. "I am new to the country, my friend," he said. "I don't know anything about the usual custom employed to force a man to give up his land. Could you suggest anything?"

Dakota deliberately took up a wax-end, rolled it, and squinted his eyes as he forced the end of the thread through the eye of the

needle which he held in the other hand. So far as Langford could see he exhibited no emotion whatever; his face was inscrutable; he might not have heard.

Yet Langford knew that he had heard; was certain that he grasped the full meaning of the question; probably felt some emotion over it, and was masking it by appearing to busy himself with the saddle. Langford's respect for him grew and he wisely kept silent, knowing that in time Dakota would answer. But when the answer did come it was not the one that Langford expected. Dakota's eyes met his in a level gaze.

"Why don't you shoot him yourself?" he said, drawling his words a little.

"Not taking any chances?" Dakota's voice was filled with a cold sarcasm as he continued, after an interval during which Langford kept a discreetly still tongue. "Your business principles don't take you quite that far, eh? And so you've come over to get me to shoot him? Why didn't you say so in the beginning—it would have saved all this time." He laughed coldly.

“What makes you think that you could hire me to put Doubler out of business?”

“I saw you shoot Blanca,” said Langford. “And I sounded Duncan.” It did not disturb him to discover that Dakota had all along been aware of the object of his visit. It rather pleased him, in fact, to be given proof of the man’s discernment—it showed that he was deep and clever.

“You saw me shoot Blanca,” said Dakota with a strange smile, “and Duncan told you I was the man to put Doubler away. Those are my recommendations.” His voice was slightly ironical, almost concealing a slight harshness. “Did Duncan mention that he was a friend of mine?” he asked. “No?” His smile grew mocking. “Just merely mentioned that I was uncommonly clever in the art of getting people—undesirable people—out of the way. Don’t get the idea, though, because Duncan told you, that I make a business of shooting folks. I put Blanca out of the way because it was a question of him or me—I shot him to save my own hide. Shooting Doubler would be quite another proposition.

Still——” He looked at Langford, his eyes narrowing and smoldering with a mysterious fire.

It seemed that he was inviting Langford to make a proposal, and the latter smiled evilly. “Still,” he said, repeating Dakota’s word with a significant inflection, “you don’t refuse to listen to me. It would be worth a thousand dollars to me to have Doubler out of the way,” he added.

It was out now, and Langford sat silent while Dakota gazed into the distance that reached toward the nester’s cabin. Langford watched Dakota closely, but there was an absolute lack of expression in the latter’s face.

“How are you offering to pay the thousand?” questioned Dakota. “And when?”

“In cash, when Doubler isn’t here any more.”

Dakota looked up at him, his face a mask of immobility. “That *sounds* all right,” he said, with slow emphasis. “I reckon you’ll put it in writing?”

Langford’s eyes narrowed; he smiled craftily. “That,” he said smoothly,

“would put me in your power. I have never been accused of being a fool by any of the men with whom I have done business. Don’t you think that at my age it is a little late to start?”

“I reckon we don’t make any deal,” laughed Dakota shortly.

“We’ll arrange it this way,” suggested Langford. “Doubler is not the only man I want to get rid of. I want your land, too. But”—he added as he saw Dakota’s lips harden—“I don’t purpose to proceed against you in the manner I am dealing with Doubler. I flatter myself that I know men quite well. I’d like to buy your land. What would be a fair price for it?”

“Five thousand.”

“We’ll put it this way, then,” said Langford, briskly and silkily. “I will give you an agreement worded in this manner: ‘One month after date I promise to pay to Dakota the sum of six thousand dollars, in consideration of his rights and interest in the Star brand, provided that within one month from date he persuades Ben Doubler to leave Union county.’” He looked at Da-

kota with a significant smile. "You see," he said, "that I am not particularly desirous of being instrumental in causing Doubler's death—you have misjudged me."

Dakota's eyes met his with a glance of perfect knowledge. His smile possessed a subtly mocking quality—which was slightly disconcerting to Langford.

"I reckon you'll be an angel—give you time," he said. "I am accepting that proposition, though," he added. "I've been wanting to leave here—I've got tired of it. And"—he continued with a mysterious smile—"if things turn out as I expect, you'll be glad to have me go." He rose from the bench. "Let's write that agreement," he suggested.

They entered the cabin, and a few minutes later Dakota sat again on the box in the lee of the cabin wall, mending his saddle, the signed agreement in his pocket. Smiling, Langford rode the river trail, satisfied with the result of his visit. Turning once—as he reached the rise upon which Sheila had halted that morning after leaving Dakota's cabin, Langford looked back. Da-

kota was still busy with his saddle. Langford urged his pony down the slope of the rise and vanished from view. Then Dakota ceased working on the saddle, drew out the signed agreement and read it through many times.

“That man,” he said finally, looking toward the crest of the slope where Langford had disappeared, “thinks he has convinced me that I ought to kill my best friend. He hasn’t changed a bit—not a damned bit!”

CHAPTER X

DUNCAN ADDS TWO AND TWO

HAD Langford known that there had been a witness to his visit to Dakota he might not have ridden away from the latter's cabin so entirely satisfied with the result of his interview.

Duncan had been much interested in Langford's differences with Doubler. He had agitated the trouble, and he fully expected Langford to take him into his confidence should any aggressive movement be contemplated. He had even expected to be allowed to plan the details of the scheme which would have as its object the downfall of the nester, for thus he hoped to satisfy his personal vengeance against the latter.

But since the interview with Doubler at Doubler's cabin, Langford had been

strangely silent regarding his plans. Not once had he referred to the nester, and his silence had nettled Duncan. Langford had ignored his hints, had returned monosyllabic replies to his tentative questions, causing the manager to appear to be an outsider in an affair in which he felt a vital interest.

It was annoying, to say the least, and Duncan's nature rebelled against the slight, whether intentional or accidental. He had waited patiently until the morning following his conversation with Langford about Dakota, certain that the Double R owner would speak, but when after breakfast the next morning Langford had ridden away without breaking his silence, the manager had gone into the ranchhouse, secured his field glasses, mounted his pony, and followed.

He kept discreetly in the rear, lingering in the depressions, skirting the bases of the hills, concealing himself in draws and behind boulders—never once making the mistake of appearing on the skyline. And when Langford was sitting on the box in front of Dakota's cabin, the manager was

deep into the woods that surrounded the clearing where the cabin stood, watching intently through his field glasses.

He saw Langford depart, remained after his departure to see Dakota repeatedly read the signed agreement. Of course, he was entirely ignorant of what had transpired, but there was little doubt in his mind that the two had reached some sort of an understanding. That their conversation and subsequent agreement concerned Doubler he had little doubt either, for fresh in his mind was a recollection of his conversation with Langford, distinguished by Langford's carefully guarded questions regarding Dakota's ability with the six-shooter. He felt that Langford was deliberately leaving him out of the scheme, whatever it was.

Puzzled and raging inwardly over the slight, Duncan did not return to the ranch-house that day and spent the night at one of the line camps. The following day he rode in to the ranchhouse to find that Langford had gone out riding with Sheila. Morose, sullen, Duncan again rode abroad, returning with the dusk. In his conversation

with Langford that night the Double R owner made no reference to Doubler, and, studying Sheila, Duncan thought she seemed depressed.

During her ride that day with her father Sheila had received a startling revelation of his character. She had questioned him regarding his treatment of Doubler, ending with a plea for justice for the latter. For the first time during all the time she had known Langford she had seen an angry intolerance in his eyes, and though his voice had been as bland and smooth as ever, it did not heal the wound which had been made in her heart over the discovery that he could feel impatient with her.

"My dear Sheila," he said, "I should regret to find that you are interested in my business affairs."

"Doubler declares that you are unjust," she persisted, determined to do her best to avert the trouble that seemed impending.

"Doubler is an obstacle in the path of progress and will get the consideration he deserves," he said shortly. "Please do not meddle with what does not concern you."

Thus had an idol which Sheila worshiped

been tumbled from its pedestal. Sheila surveyed it, lying shattered at her feet, with moist eyes. It might be restored, patched so that it would resemble its original shape, but never again would it appear the same in her eyes. She had received a glimpse of her father's real character; she saw the merciless, designing, real man stripped of the polished veneer that she had admired; his soul lay naked before her, seared and rendered unlovely by the blackness of deceit and trickery.

As the days passed, however, she collected the fragments of the shattered idol and began to replace them. Piece by piece she fitted them together, cementing them with her faith, so that in time the idol resembled its original shape.

She had been too exacting, she told herself. Men had ways of dealing with one another which women could not understand. Her ideas of justice were tempered with mercy and pity; she allowed her heart to map out her line of conduct toward her fellow men, and as a consequence her sympathies were broad and tender. In busi-

ness, though, she supposed, it must be different. There mind must rule. It was a struggle in which the keenest wit and the sharpest instinct counted, and in which the emotion of mercy was subordinate to the love of gain. And so in time she erected her idol again and the cracks and seams in it became almost invisible.

While she had been restoring her idol there had been other things to occupy her mind. A thin line divides tragedy from comedy, and after the tragedy of discovering her father's real character Sheila longed for something to take her mind out of the darkness. A recollection of Duncan's jealousy, which he had exhibited on the day that she had related the story of her rescue by Dakota, still abided with her, and convinced that she might secure diversion by fanning the spark that she had discovered, she began by inducing Duncan to ask her to ride with him.

Sitting on the grass one day in the shade of some fir-balsams on a slope several miles down the river, Sheila looked at Duncan with a smile.

202 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

"I believe that I am beginning to like the country," she said.

"I expected you would like it after you were here a while. Everybody does. It grows into one. If you ever go back East you will never be contented—you'll be dreaming and longing. The West improves on acquaintance, like the people."

"Meaning?" she said, with a defiant mockery so plain in her eyes that Duncan drew a deep breath.

"Meaning that you ought to begin to like us—the people," he said.

"Perhaps I do like some of the people," she laughed.

"For instance," he said, his face reddening a little.

She looked at him with a taunting smile. "I don't believe that I like you—so very well. You get too cross when things don't suit you."

"I think you are mistaken," he challenged. "When have I been cross?"

Sheila laughed. "Do you remember the night that I came home and told you and father how Dakota had rescued me from

the quicksand? Well," she continued, noting his nod and the frown which accompanied it, "you were cross that night—almost boorish. You moped and went off to bed without saying good-night."

It pleased Duncan to tell her that he had forgotten if he had ever acted that way, and she did not press him. And so a silence fell between them.

"You said you were beginning to like some of the people," said Duncan presently. "You don't like me. Then who do you like?"

"Well," she said, appearing to meditate, but in reality watching him closely so that she might catch his gaze when he looked up. "There's Ben Doubler. He seems to be a very nice old man. And"—Duncan looked at her and she met his gaze fairly, her eyes dancing with mischief—"and Dakota. He is a character, don't you think?"

Duncan frowned darkly and removed his gaze from her face, directing it down into the plain on the other side of the river. What strange fatality had linked her sympathies and admiration with his enemies?

A rage which he dared not let her see seized him, and he sat silent, clenching and unclenching his hands.

She saw his condition and pressed him without mercy.

"He *is* a character, isn't he? An odd one, but attractive?"

Duncan sneered. "He pulled you out of the quicksand, of course. Anybody could have done that, if they'd been around. I reckon that's what makes him 'attractive' in your eyes. On the other hand, he put Texas Blanca out of business. Does that killing help to make him attractive?"

"Wasn't Blanca his enemy. If you remember, you told father and me that Blanca sold him some stolen cattle. Then, according to what I have heard of the story, he met Blanca in Lazette, ordered him to leave, and when he didn't go he shot him. I understand that that is the code in matters of that sort—people have to take the law in their own hands. But he gave Blanca the opportunity to shoot first. Wasn't that fair?"

It seemed odd to her that she was defend-

ing the man who had wronged her, yet strangely enough she discovered that defending him gave her a thrill of satisfaction, though she assured herself that the satisfaction came from the fact that she was engaged in the task of arousing Duncan's jealousy.

"You've been inquiring about him, then?" said Duncan, his face dark with rage and hatred. "What I told you about that calf deal is the story that Dakota himself tells about it. A lot of people in this country don't believe Dakota's story. They believe what I believe, that Dakota and Blanca were in partnership on that deal, and that Dakota framed up that story about Blanca selling out to him to avert suspicion. It's likely that they wised up to the fact that we were on to them."

"I believe you mentioned your suspicions to Dakota himself, didn't you? The day you went over after the calves? You had quite a talk with him about them, didn't you?" said Sheila, sweetly.

Duncan's face whitened. "Who told you that?" he demanded.

"And he told you that if you ever interfered with him again, or that if he heard of you repeating your suspicions to anyone, he would do something to you—run you out of the country, or something like that, didn't he?"

"Who told you that?" repeated Duncan.

"Doubler told me," returned Sheila with a smile.

Duncan's face worked with impotent wrath as he looked at her. "So Doubler's been gassing again?" he said with a sneer. "Well, there's never been any love lost between Doubler and me, and so what he says don't amount to much." He laughed oddly. "It's strange to think how thick you are with Doubler," he said. "I understand that your dad and Doubler ain't exactly on a friendly footing, that your dad was trying to buy him out and that he won't sell. There's likely to be trouble, for your dad is determined to get Doubler's land."

However, that was a subject upon which Sheila did not care to dwell.

"I don't think that I am interested in that," she said. "I presume that father is

able to take care of his own affairs without any assistance from me."

Duncan's eyes lighted with interest. Her words showed that she was aware of Langford's differences with the nester. Probably her father had told her—taking her into his confidence while ignoring his manager. Perhaps he had even told her of his visit to Dakota; perhaps there had been more than one visit and Sheila had accompanied him. Undoubtedly, he told himself, Sheila's admiration for Dakota had resulted from not one, but many, meetings. He flushed at the thought, and was forced to look away from Sheila for fear that she might see the passion that flamed in his eyes.

"You seen Dakota lately?" he questioned, after he had regained sufficient control of himself to be able to speak quietly.

"No." Sheila was flecking some dust from her skirts with her riding whip, and her manner was one of absolute lack of interest.

"Then you ain't been riding with your father?" said Duncan.

208 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

"Some." Sheila continued to brush the dust from her skirts. After answering Duncan's question, however, she realized that there had been a subtle undercurrent of meaning in his voice, and she turned and looked sharply at him.

"Why?" she demanded. "Do you mean that father has visited Dakota?"

"I reckon I'm meaning just that."

Sheila did not like the expression in Duncan's eyes, and her chin was raised a little as she turned from him and gave her attention to flecking the grass near her with the lash of her riding whip.

"Father attends to his own business," she said with some coldness, for she resented Duncan's apparent desire to interfere. "I told you that before. What he does in a business way does not interest me."

"No?" said Duncan mockingly. "Well, he's made some sort of a deal with Dakota!" he snapped, aware of his lack of wisdom in telling her this, but unable to control his resentment over the slight which had been imposed on him by Langford, and by her own chilling manner, which seemed to emphasize

the fact that he had been left outside their intimate councils.

"A deal?" said Sheila quickly, unable to control her interest.

For a moment he did not answer. He felt her gaze upon him, and he met it, smiling mysteriously. Under the sudden necessity of proving his statement, his thoughts centered upon the conclusion which had resulted from his suspicions—that Langford's visit to Dakota concerned Doubler. Equivocation would have taken him safely away from the pitfall into which his rash words had almost plunged him, but he felt that any evasion now would only bring scorn into the eyes which he wished to see alight with something else. Besides, here was an opportunity to speak a derogatory word about his enemy, and he could not resist—could not throw it carelessly aside. There was a venomous note in his voice when he finally answered:

"The other day your father was speaking to me about gun-men. I told him that Dakota would do anything for money."

A slow red appeared in Sheila's cheeks,

mounted to her temples, disappeared entirely and was succeeded by a paleness. She kept her gaze averted, and Duncan could not see her eyes—they were turned toward the slumberous plains that stretched away into the distance on the other side of the river. But Duncan knew that he had scored, and was not bothered over the possibility of there being little truth in his implied charge. He watched her, gloating over her, certain that at a stroke he had effectually eliminated Dakota as a rival.

Sheila turned suddenly to him. "How do you know that Dakota would do anything like that?"

Duncan smiled as he saw her lips, straight and white, and tightening coldly.

"How do I know?" he jeered. "How does a man know anything in this country? By using his eyes, of course. I've used mine. I've watched Dakota for five years. I've known all along that he isn't on the square—that he has been running his branding iron on other folks' cattle. I've told you that he worked a crooked deal on me, and then sent Blanca over the divide when he

thought there was a chance of Blanca giving the deal away. I am told that when he met Blanca in the Red Dog Blanca told him plainly that he didn't know anything about the calf deal. That shows how he treats his friends. He'll do anything for money.

"The other day I saw your father at his cabin, talking to him. They had quite a confab. Your father has had trouble with Doubler—you know that. He has threatened to run Doubler off the Two Forks. I heard that myself. He wouldn't try to run Doubler off himself—that's too dangerous a business for him to undertake. Not wanting to take the chance himself he hires someone else. Who? Dakota's the only gunman around these parts. Therefore, your dad goes to Dakota. He and Dakota signed a paper—I saw Dakota reading it. I've just put two and two together, and that's the result. I reckon I ain't far out of the way."

Sheila laughed as she might have laughed had someone told her that she herself had plotted to murder Doubler—a laugh full of scorn and mockery. Yet in her eyes, which

were wide with horror, and in her face, which was suddenly drawn and white, was proof that Duncan's words had hurt her mortally.

She was silent; she did not offer to defend Dakota, for in her thoughts still lingered a recollection of the scene of the shooting in Lazette. And when she considered her father's distant manner toward her and Ben Doubler's grave prediction of trouble, it seemed that perhaps Duncan was right. Yet in spite of the shooting of Blanca and the evil light which was now thrown on Dakota through Duncan's deductions, she felt confident that Dakota would not become a party to a plot in which the murder of a man was deliberately planned. He had wronged her and he had killed a man, but at the quicksand crossing that day—despite the rage which had been in her heart against him—she had studied him and had become convinced that behind his recklessness, back of the questionable impulses that seemed at times to move him, there lurked qualities which were wholly admirable, and which could be felt by anyone who came in contact with him. Certainly those qualities

which she had seen had not been undiscovered by Duncan—and others.

She remembered now that on a former occasion the manager had practically admitted his fear of Dakota, and then there was his conduct on that day when she had asked him to return Dakota's pony. Duncan's manner then had seemed to indicate that he feared Dakota—at the least did not like him. Ben Doubler had given her a different version of the trouble between Dakota and Duncan; how Duncan had accused Dakota of stealing the Double R calves, and how in the presence of Duncan's own men Dakota had forced him to apologize. Taken altogether, it seemed that Duncan's present suspicions were the result of his dislike, or fear, of Dakota. Convinced of this, her eyes flashed with contempt when she looked at the manager.

"I believe you are lying," she said coldly. "You don't like Dakota. But I have faith in him—in his manhood. I don't believe that any man who has the courage to force another man to apologize to him in the face of great odds, would, or could, be so

entirely base as to plan to murder a poor, unoffending old man in cold blood. Perhaps you are not lying," she concluded with straight lips, "but the very least that can be said for you is that you have a lurid imagination!"

In Duncan's gleaming, shifting eyes, in the lips which were tensed over his teeth in a snarl, she could see the bitterness that was in his heart over the incident to which she had just referred.

"Wait," he said smiling evilly. "You'll know more about Dakota before long."

Sheila rose and walked to her pony, mounting the animal and riding slowly away from the river. She did not see the queer smile on Duncan's face as she rode, but looking back at the distance of a hundred yards, she saw that he did not intend to follow her. He was still sitting where she had left him, his back to her, his face turned toward the plains which spread away toward Dakota's cabin, twenty miles down the river.

CHAPTER XI

A PARTING AND A VISIT

THE problem which filled Duncan's mind as he sat on the edge of the slope overlooking the river was a three-sided one. To reach a conclusion the emotions of fear, hatred, and jealousy would have to be considered in the light of their relative importance.

There was, for example, his fear of Dakota, which must be taken into account when he meditated any action prompted by his jealousy, and his fear of Dakota was a check on his desires, a damper which must control the heat of his emotions. He might hate Dakota, but his fear of him would prevent his taking any action which might expose his own life to risk. On the other hand, jealousy urged him to accept any risk; it kept telling him over and over that he was a fool to allow Dakota to live. But Dun-

can knew better than to attempt an open clash with Dakota; each time that he had looked into Dakota's eyes he had seen there something which told him plainer than words of his own inferiority—that he would have no chance in a man-to-man encounter with him. And his latest experience with Dakota had proved that.

However, Duncan's character would not permit him to concede defeat, and his revenge was not a thing to be considered lightly. Therefore, though he sat for a long time on the slope, meditating over his problem, in the end he smiled. It was not a good smile to see, for his eyes were alight with a crafty, designing gleam, and there was a cruel curve in the lines of his lips. When he finally mounted his pony and rode away from the slope he was whistling.

During the next few days he did not see much of Sheila, for he avoided the ranch-house as much as possible. He rode out with Langford many times, and though he covertly questioned the Double R owner concerning the affair with Doubler he could gain no satisfying information. Langford's

reticence further aggravated the passions which rioted in his heart, and finally one afternoon when they rode up to the ranch-house his curiosity could be held in check no longer, and he put the blunt question:

“What have you done about Doubler?”

Langford's shifting eyes rested for the fraction of a second on the face of his manager, and then the old, bland smile came into his own and he answered smoothly: “Nothing.”

“I have been thinking,” said Duncan carelessly, but with a sharp side glance at his employer, “that it wouldn't be a half bad idea to set a gun-man on Doubler—a man like Dakota, for instance.”

The manager saw Langford's lips straighten a little, and his eyes flashed with a sudden fire. The expression on Langford's face strengthened the conviction already in Duncan's mind concerning the motive of his employer's visit to Dakota.

“I don't think I care to have any dealings with Dakota,” said Langford shortly.

Duncan's eyes blazed again. “I reckon if you'd go talk to him,” he persisted, turn-

ing his head so that Langford could not see the suppressed rage in his eyes, "you might be able to make a deal with him."

"I don't wish to deal with him. I have decided not to bother Doubler at present. And I have no desire to talk with Dakota. Frankly, my dear Duncan, I don't like the man."

"You been in the habit of forming opinions of men you've never talked to?" said Duncan. He could not keep the sneer out of his voice.

Langford noticed it and laughed softly.

"It is my recollection that a certain man of my acquaintance advised me at length of Dakota's shortcomings," he said significantly. "For me to talk to Dakota after that would be to consider this man's words valueless. I will have nothing to do with Dakota. That is," he added, "unless you have altered your opinion of him."

Duncan did not reply, and he said nothing more to Langford on the subject, but he had discovered that for some reason Langford had chosen to keep the knowledge of his visit to Dakota secret, and Duncan's

suspicious that the visit concerned Doubler became a conviction. Filled with resentment over Langford's attitude toward him, and with his mind definitely fixed upon the working out of his problem, Duncan decided to visit Doubler.

He chose a day when Langford had ridden away to a distant cow camp, and as when he was following the Double R owner, he did not ride the beaten trail but kept behind the ridges and in the depressions, and when he came within sight of Doubler's cabin he halted to reconnoiter. A swift survey of the corral showed him a rangy, piebald pony, which he knew to belong to Dakota. As the animal had on a bridle and a saddle he surmised that Dakota's visit would not be of long duration, and having no desire to visit Doubler in the presence of his rival, he shunted his own horse off the edge of a sand dune and down into the bed of a dry arroyo. Urging the animal along this, he presently reached a sand flat on whose edge arose a grove of fir-balsam and cottonwood.

For an hour, deep in the grove, he

watched the cabin, and at length he saw Dakota come out; saw a smile on his face; heard him laugh. His lips writhed at the sound, and he listened intently to catch the conversation which was carried on between the two men, but the distance was too great. However, he was able to judge from the actions of the two that their relations were decidedly friendly, and this discovery immediately raised a doubt in his mind as to the correctness of his deductions.

Yet the doubt did not seriously affect his determination to carry out the plan he had in mind, and when a few moments after coming out of the cabin, Dakota departed down the river trail, Duncan slowly rode out of the grove and approached the cabin.

Doubler stood in the open doorway, looking after Dakota, and when the latter finally disappeared around a bend in the river the nester turned and saw Duncan. Instantly he stepped inside the cabin door, reappearing immediately, holding a rifle. Duncan continued to ride forward, raising one hand, with the palm toward Doubler, as a sign of the peacefulness of his intentions. The lat-

ter permitted him to approach, though he held the rifle belligerently.

"I want to talk," said Duncan, when he had come near enough to make himself heard.

"Pull up right where you are, then," commanded Doubler. He was silent while Duncan drew his pony to a halt and sat motionless in the saddle looking at him. Then his voice came with a truculent snap:

"You alone?"

Duncan nodded.

"Where's your new boss?" sarcastically inquired Doubler. "Ain't you scared he'll git lost—runnin' around alone without anyone to look after him?"

"I ain't his keeper," returned Duncan shortly.

Doubler laughed unbelievably. "You was puttin' in a heap of your time bein' his keeper, the last I saw of you," he declared coldly.

"Mebbe I was. We've had a falling out." The venom in Duncan's voice was not at all pretended. "He's double crossed me."

“Double crossed you?” There was disbelief and suspicion in Doubler’s laugh. “How’s he done that? I reckoned you was too smart for anyone to do that to you?” The sarcasm in this last brought a dark red into Duncan’s face, but he successfully concealed his resentment and smiled.

“That’s all right,” he said; “I’ve got more than that coming from you. I’m telling you about what he done to me if you ain’t got any objections to me getting off my horse.”

“Tell me from where you are.” In spite of the coldness in the nester’s voice there was interest in his eyes. “Mebbe you an’ him have had a fallin’ out, but I ain’t takin’ any chances on you bein’ my friend—not a durned chance.”

“That’s right. I don’t blame you for not wanting to take a chance, and I’m not pretending to be your friend. And I sure ain’t any friendly to Langford. He’s double crossed me, but I ain’t telling how he done it—that’s between him and me. But I want to tell you something that will interest you a whole lot. It’s about some guy which is

trying to double cross you. To prove that I ain't thinking to plug you when you ain't looking I'm leaving my gun here." He drew out his six-shooter and stuck it behind his slicker, dismounted, and threw the reins over the pony's head.

In silence Doubler suffered him to approach, though he kept his rifle ready in his hand and his eyes still continued to wear a belligerent expression.

"You and me ain't been what you might call friendly for a long time," offered Duncan when he had halted a few feet from Doubler. "We've had words, but I've never tried to take any mean advantage of you—which I might have done if I'd wanted to." He smiled ingratiatingly.

"We ain't goin' to go over what's happened between us," declared Doubler coldly. "We're lettin' that go by. If you'll stick to the palaver that you spoke about mebbe we'll be able to git along for a minute or two. Meanwhile, you'll excuse me if I keep this here gun in shape for you if you try any monkey business."

Duncan masked his dislike of Doubler

under a deprecatory smile. "That's right," he agreed. "We'll let what's happened pass without talking about it. What's between us now is something different. I've never pretended to be your friend, and I'm not pretending to be your friend now. But I've always been square with you, and I'm square now. Can you say that about him?" He jerked his thumb in the direction of the river trail, on which Dakota had vanished some time before.

"Him?" inquired Doubler. "You mean Dakota?" He caught Duncan's nod and smiled slowly. "I reckon you're some off your range," he said. "There ain't no comparin' Dakota to you—he's always been my friend."

"A man's got a friend one day and he's an enemy the next," said Duncan mysteriously.

"Meanin'?"

"Meaning that Dakota ain't so much of a friend as you think he is."

Doubler's lips grew straight and hard. "I reckon that ends the palaver," he said coldly, while he fingered the rifle in his hand

significantly. "If that's what you come for you can be hittin' the breeze right back to the Double R. I'm givin' you——"

"You're traveling too fast," remonstrated Duncan, a hoarseness coming into his voice. "You'll talk different when you hear what I've got to say. I reckon you know that Langford ain't any friendly to you?"

"I don't see——" began Doubler.

He was interrupted by Duncan's harsh laugh. "Of course you don't see," he said. "I've come over here to make you open your eyes. Langford ain't no friend of yours, and I reckon that you wouldn't consider any man your friend which sets in his cabin a couple of hours talking to Langford, about you?"

"Meanin' that Langford's been to see Dakota?" Doubler's voice was suddenly harsh and his eyes glinted with suspicion. Certain that he had scored, Duncan turned and smiled into the distance. When he again faced Doubler his face wore an expression of sympathy.

"When a man's been a friend to you and

you find that he's going to double cross you, it's apt to make you feel pretty mean," he said. "I'm allowing that. But there's a lot of us get double crossed. I got it and I'm seeing that they don't ring in any cold deck on you."

"How do you know Dakota's tryin' to do that?" demanded Doubler.

Duncan laughed. "I've kept my eyes open. Also, I've been listening right hard. I wasn't so far away when Langford went to Dakota's shack, and I heard considerable of what they said about you."

Doubler's interest was now intense; he spoke eagerly: "What did they say?"

"I reckon you ought to be able to guess what they said," said Duncan with a crafty smile. "I reckon you know that Langford wants your land mighty bad, don't you? And you won't sell. Didn't he tell you in front of me that he was going to make trouble for you? He wants me to make it, though; he wants me to set the boys on you. But I won't do it. Then he shuts up like a clam and don't say anything more to me about it. He saw Dakota send Blanca over

the divide and he's some impressed by his shooting. He figures that if Dakota puts one man out of business he'll put another out."

"Meanin' that Langford's hired Dakota to look for me?" Doubler's eyes were gleaming brightly.

"You're some keen, after all," taunted Duncan.

Doubler's jaws snapped. "You're a liar!" he said; "Dakota wouldn't do it!"

"Maybe I'm a liar," said Duncan, his face paling but his voice low and quiet. He was not surprised that Doubler should exhibit emotion over the charge that his friend was planning to murder him, yet he knew that the suspicion once established in Doubler's mind would soon grow to the stature of a conviction.

"Maybe I'm a liar," repeated Duncan. "But if you'll use your brain a little you'll see that things look bad for you. Dakota's been here. Did he tell you about Langford coming to see him? I reckon not," he added as he caught Doubler's blank stare; "he'd likely not tell you about it. But I reckon

that if he was your friend he'd tell you. I reckon you told him about Langford wanting your land—about him telling you he'd make things hot for you?"

Doubler nodded silently, and Duncan continued. "Well," he said, with a short laugh, "I've told you, and it's up to you. They were talking about you, and if Dakota's your friend, as you're claiming him to be, he'd have told you what they was talking about—if it wasn't what I say it was—him knowing how Langford feels toward you. And they didn't only talk. Langford wrote something on a paper and gave it to Dakota. I don't know what he wrote, but it seemed to tickle Dakota a heap. Leastways, he done a heap of laffing over it. Likely Langford's promised him a heap of dust to do the job. Mebbe he's your friend, but if I was you I wouldn't give him no chance to say I drew first."

Doubler placed his rifle down and passed a hand slowly and hesitatingly over his forehead. "I don't like to think that of Dakota," he said, faith and suspicion battling for supremacy. "Dakota just left here; he

acted a heap friendly—as usual—mebbe more so.”

“I reckon that when a man goes gunning for another man he don’t advertise a whole lot,” observed Duncan insinuatingly.

“No,” agreed Doubler, staring blankly into the distance where he had last seen his supposed friend, “a man don’t generally do a heap of advertisin’ when he’s out lookin’ for a man.” He sat for a time staring straight ahead, and then he suddenly looked up, his eyes filled with a savage fierceness. “How do I know you ain’t lyin’ to me?” he demanded, glaring at Duncan, his hands clenched in an effort to control himself.

Duncan’s eyes did not waver. “I reckon you *don’t* know whether I’m lying,” he returned, showing his teeth in a slight smile. “But I reckon you’re twenty-one and ought to have your eye-teeth cut. Anyway, you ought to know that a man like Langford, who’s wanting your land, don’t go to talk with a man like Dakota, who’s some on the shoot, for nothing. How do you know that Langford and Dakota ain’t friends? How do you know but that they’ve been friends

10 THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY

back East? Do you know where Dakota came from? Mebbe he's from the East, too. I'm telling you one thing," added Duncan, and now his voice was filled with passion, "Dakota and Sheila Langford are pretty thick. She makes believe that she don't like him, but he saved her from a quicksand, and she's been running with him considerable. Takes his part, too; does it, but she makes you believe that she don't like him. I reckon she's pretty foxy."

Doubler's memory went back to a conversation he had had with Sheila in which Dakota had been the subject under discussion. He remembered that she had shown a decided coldness, suggesting by her manner that she and Dakota were not on the best of terms. Could it be that she had merely pretended this coldness? Could it be that she was concerned in the plot against him, that she and her father and Dakota were combined against him for the common purpose of taking his life?

He was convinced that any such suspicion against Sheila must be unjust, for he had studied her face many times and was cer-

tain that there was not a line of deceit in it. And yet, was it not odd that, when he had told her of the trouble between him and her father, she had not immediately taken her parent's side? To be sure, she had told him that Langford was merely her stepfather, but could not that statement also have been a misleading one? And even if Langford were only her stepfather, would she not have felt it her duty to align herself with him?

"I reckon you know a heap about Dakota, don't you?" came Duncan's voice, breaking into Doubler's reflections. "You know, for instance, that Dakota came here from Dakota—or anyway, he says he came here from there. We'll say you know that. But what do you know about Langford? Didn't he tell you that he was going to 'get' you?"

Duncan turned his back to Doubler and walked to his pony. He drew out his six-shooter, stuck it into its holster, and placed one foot in a stirrup, preparatory to mounting. Then he turned and spoke gravely to Doubler.

232 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

"I've done all I could," he said. "You know how you stand and the rest of it is up to you. You can go on, letting Dakota and Sheila pretend to be friendly to you, and some day you'll get wise awful sudden—when it's too late. Or, you can wise up now and fix Dakota before he gets a chance at you. I reckon that's all. You can't say that I didn't put you wise to the game."

He swung into the saddle and urged the pony toward the crossing. Looking back from a crest of a rise on the other side of the river, he saw Doubler still standing in the doorway, his head bowed in his hands. Duncan smiled, his lips in cold, crafty curves, for he had planted the seed of suspicion and was satisfied that it would presently flourish and grow until it would finally accomplish the destruction of his rival, Dakota.

CHAPTER XII

A MEETING ON THE RIVER TRAIL

ABOUT ten o'clock in the morning of a perfect day Sheila left the Double R ranchhouse for a ride to the Two Forks to visit Doubler. This new world into which she had come so hopefully had lately grown very lonesome. It had promised much and it had given very little. The country itself was not to blame for the state of her mind, though, she told herself as she rode over the brown, sun-scorched grass of the river trail, it was the people. They—even her father—seemed to hold aloof from her.

It seemed that she would never be able to fit in anywhere. She was convinced that the people with whom she was forced to associate were entirely out of accord with the principles of life which had been her guide—they appeared selfish, cold, and distant.

Duncan's sister, the only woman beside herself in the vicinity, had discouraged all her little advances toward a better acquaintance, betraying in many ways a disinclination toward those exchanges of confidence which are the delight of every normal woman. Sheila had become aware very soon that there could be no hope of gaining her friendship or confidence and so of late she had ceased her efforts.

Of course, she could not attempt to cultivate an acquaintance with any of the cowboys—she already knew *one* too well, and the knowledge of her relationship to him had the effect of dulling her desire for seeking the company of the others.

For Duncan she had developed a decided dislike which amounted almost to hatred. She had been able to see quite early in their acquaintance the defects of his character, and though she had played on his jealousy in a spirit of fun, she had been careful to make him see that anything more than mere acquaintance was impossible. At least that was what she had tried to do, and she doubted much whether she had succeeded.

Doubler was the only one who had betrayed any real friendship for her, and to him, in her lonesomeness, she turned, in spite of the warning he had given her. She had visited him once since the day following her father's visit, and he had received her with his usual cordiality, but she had been able to detect a certain constraint in his manner which had caused her to determine to stay away from the Two Forks. But this morning she felt that she must go somewhere, and she selected Doubler's cabin.

Since that day when on the edge of the butte overlooking the river Duncan had voiced his suspicions that her father had planned to remove Doubler, Sheila had felt more than ever the always widening gulf that separated her from her parent. From the day on which he had become impatient with her when she had questioned him concerning his intentions with regard to Doubler he had treated her in much the manner that he always treated her, though it had seemed to her that there was something lacking; there was a certain strained civility in his manner, a veneer which smoothed over

the breach of trust which his attitude that day had created.

Many times, watching him, Sheila had wondered why she had never been able to peer through the mask of his imperturbability at the real, unlovely character it concealed. She believed it was because she had always trusted him and had not taken the trouble to try to uncover his real character. She had tried for a long time to fight down the inevitable, growing estrangement, telling herself that she had been, and was, mistaken in her estimate of his character since the day he had told her not to meddle with his affairs, and she had nearly succeeded in winning the fight when Duncan had again destroyed her faith with the story of her father's visit to Dakota.

Duncan had added two and two, he had told her when furnishing her with the threads out of which he had constructed the fabric of his suspicions, and she was compelled to acknowledge that they seemed sufficiently strong. Contemplation of the situation, however, had convinced her that Dakota was partly to blame, and her anger

against him—greatly softened since the rescue at the quicksand—flared out again.

Two weeks had passed since Duncan had told her of his suspicions, and they had been two weeks of constant worry and dread to her.

Unable to stand the suspense longer she had finally decided to seek out Dakota to attempt to confirm Duncan's story of her father's visit and to plead with Dakota to withhold his hand. But first she would see Doubler.

The task of talking to Dakota about anything was not to her liking, but she compromised with her conscience by telling herself that she owed it to herself to prevent the murder of Doubler—that if the nester should be killed with her in possession of the plan for his taking off, and able to lift a hand in protest or warning, she would be as guilty as her father or Dakota.

As she rode she could not help contrasting Dakota's character to those of her father and Duncan. She eliminated Duncan immediately, as being not strong enough to compare either favorably or unfavorably

with either of the other two. And, much against her will, she was compelled to admit that with all his shortcomings Dakota made a better figure than her father. But there was little consolation for her in this comparison, for she bitterly assured herself that there was nothing attractive in either. Both had wronged her—Dakota deliberately and maliciously; her father had placed the bar of a cold civility between her and himself, and she could no longer go to him with her confidences. She had lost his friendship, and he had lost her respect.

Of late she had speculated much over Dakota. That day at the quicksand crossing he had seemed to be a different man from the one who had stood with revolver in hand before the closed door of his cabin, giving her a choice of two evils. For one thing, she was no longer afraid of him; in his treatment of her at the crossing he had not appeared as nearly so forbidding as formerly, had been almost attractive to her, in those moments when she could forget the injury he had done her. Those moments had been few, to be sure, but during them she had

caught flashes of the real Dakota, and though she fought against admiring him, she knew that deep in her heart lingered an emotion which must be taken into account. He had really done her no serious injury, nothing which would not be undone through the simple process of the law, and in his manner on the day of the rescue there had been much respect, and in spite of the mocking levity with which he had met her reproaches she felt that he felt some slight remorse over his action.

For a time she forgot to think about Dakota, becoming lost in contemplation of the beauty of the country. Sweeping away from the crest of the ridge on which she was riding, it lay before her, basking in the warm sunlight of the morning, wild and picturesque, motionless, silent—as quiet and peaceful as might have been that morning on which, his work finished, the Creator had surveyed the new world with a satisfied eye.

She had reached a point about a mile from Doubler's cabin, still drinking in the beauty that met her eyes on every hand, when an odd sound broke the perfect quiet.

Suddenly alert, she halted her pony and listened.

The sound had been strangely like a pistol shot, though louder, she decided, as she listened to its echo reverberating in the adjacent hills. It became fainter, and finally died away, and she sat for a long time motionless in the saddle, listening, but no other sound disturbed the solemn quiet that surrounded her.

It seemed to her that the sound had come from the direction of Doubler's cabin, but she was not quite certain, knowing how difficult it was to determine the direction of sound in so vast a stretch of country.

She ceased to speculate, and once more gave her attention to the country, urging her pony forward, riding down the slope of the ridge to the level of the river trail.

Fifteen minutes later, still holding the river trail, she saw a horseman approaching, and long before he came near enough for her to distinguish his features she knew the rider for Dakota. He was sitting carelessly in the saddle, one leg thrown over the pommel, smoking a cigarette, and when

he saw her he threw the latter away, doffed his broad hat, and smiled gravely at her.

"Were you shooting?" she questioned, aware that this was an odd greeting, but eager to have the mystery of that lone shot cleared up.

"I reckon I ain't been shooting—lately," he returned. "It must have been Doubler. I heard it myself. I've just left Doubler, and he was cleaning his rifle. He must have been trying it. I do that myself, often, after I've cleaned mine, just to make sure it's right." He narrowed his eyes whimsically at her. "So you're riding the river trail again?" he said. "I thought you'd be doing it."

"Why?" she questioned, defiantly.

"Well, for one thing, there's a certain fascination about a place where one has been close to cashing in—I expect that when we've been in such a place we like to come back and look at it just to see how near we came to going over the divide. And there's another reason why I expected to see you on the river trail again. You forgot to thank me for pulling you out."

He deserved thanks for that, she knew. But there were in his voice and eyes the same subtle mockery which had marked his manner that other time, and as before she experienced a feeling of deep resentment. Why could he not have shown some evidence of remorse for his crime against her? She believed that had he done so now she might have found it in her heart to go a little distance toward forgiving him. But there was only mockery in his voice and words and her resentment against him grew. Mingling with it, moreover, was the bitterness which had settled over her within the last few days. It found expression in her voice when she answered him:

"This country is full of—of savages!"

"Indians, you mean, I reckon? Well, no, there are none around here—excepting over near Fort Union, on the reservation." He drawled hatefully and regarded her with a mild smile.

"I mean white savages!" she declared spitefully.

His smile grew broader, and then slowly faded and he sat quiet, studying her face.

The silence grew painful; she moved uneasily under his direct gaze and a dash of color swept into her cheeks. Then he spoke quietly.

"You been seeing white savages?"

"Yes!" venomously.

"Not around here?" The hateful mockery of that drawl!

"I am talking to one," she said, her eyes blazing with impotent anger.

"I thought you was meaning me," he said, without resentment. "I reckon I've got it coming to me. But at the same time that isn't exactly the way to talk to your——" He hesitated and smiled oddly, apparently aware that he had made a mistake in referring to his crime against her. He hastened to repair it. "Your rescuer," he corrected.

However, she saw through the artifice, and the bitterness in her voice grew more pronounced. "It is needless for you to remind me of our relationship," she said; "I am not likely to forget."

"Have you told your father yet?"

In his voice was the quiet scorn and the

peculiar, repressed venom which she had detected when he had referred to her father during that other occasion at the crossing. It mystified her, and yet within the past few days she had felt this scorn herself and knew that it was not remarkable. Undoubtedly he, having had much experience with men, had been able to see through Langford's mask and knew him for what he was. For the first time in her life she experienced a sensation of embarrassed guilt over hearing her name linked with Langford's, and she looked defiantly at Dakota.

"I have not told him," she said. "I won't tell him. I told you that before—I do not care to undergo the humiliation of hearing my name mentioned in the same breath with yours. And if you do not already know it, I want to tell you that David Langford is not my father; my real father died a long time ago, and Langford is only my stepfather."

A sudden moisture was in her eyes and she did not see Dakota start, did not observe the queer pallor that spread over his face, failed to detect the odd light in his

eyes. However, she heard his voice—sharp in tone and filled with genuine astonishment.

“Your stepfather?” He had spurred his pony beside hers and looking up she saw that his face had suddenly grown stern and grim. “Do you mean that?” he demanded half angrily. “Why didn’t you tell me that before? Why didn’t you tell me when—the night I married you?”

“Would it have made any difference to you?” she said bitterly. “Does it make any difference now? You have treated me like a savage; you are treating me like one now. I—I haven’t any friends at all,” she continued, her voice breaking slightly, as she suddenly realized her entire helplessness before the combined evilness of Duncan, her father, and the man who sat on his pony beside her. A sob shook her, and her hands went to her face, covering her eyes.

She sat there for a time, shuddering, and watching her closely, Dakota’s face grew slowly pale, and grim, hard lines came into his lips.

“I know what Duncan’s friendship

amounts to," he said harshly. "But isn't your stepfather your friend?"

"My friend?" She echoed his words with a hopeless intonation that closed Dakota's teeth like a vise. "I don't know what has come over him," she continued, looking up at Dakota, her eyes filled with wonder for the sympathy which she saw in his face and voice; "he has changed since he came out here; he is so selfish and heartless."

"What's he been doing? Hurting you?" She did not detect the anger in his voice, for he had kept it so low that she scarcely heard the words.

"Hurting me? No; he has not done anything to me. Don't you know?" she said scornfully, certain that he was mocking her again—for how could his interest be genuine when he was a party to the plot to murder Doubler? Yet perhaps not—maybe Duncan *had* been lying. Determined to get to the bottom of the affair as quickly as possible, Sheila continued rapidly, her scorn giving way to eagerness. "Don't you know?" And this time her voice was almost a plea. "What did father visit you

for? Wasn't it about Doubler? Didn't he hire you to—to kill him?"

She saw his lips tighten strangely, his face grow pale, his eyes flash with some mysterious emotion, and she knew in an instant that he was guilty—guilty as her father!

"Oh!" she said, and the scorn came into her voice again. "Then it is true! You and my father have conspired to murder an inoffensive old man! You—you cowards!"

He winced, as though he had received an unexpected blow in the face, but almost immediately he smiled—a hard, cold, sneering smile which chilled her.

"Who has been telling you this?" The question came slowly, without the slightest trace of excitement.

"Duncan told me."

"Duncan?" There was much contempt in his voice. "Not your father?"

She shook her head negatively, wondering at his cold composure. No wonder her father had selected him!

He laughed mirthlessly. "So that's the reason Doubler was so friendly to his rifle this morning?" he said, as though her

words had explained a mystery which had been puzzling him. "Doubler and me have been friends for a long time. But this morning while I was talking to him he kept his rifle beside him all the time. He must have heard from someone that I was gunning for him."

"Then you haven't been hired to kill him?"

He smiled at her eagerness, but spoke gravely and with an earnestness which she could not help but feel. "Miss Sheila," he said, "there isn't money enough in ten counties like this to make me kill Doubler." His lips curled with a quiet sarcasm. "You are like a lot of other people in this country," he added. "Because I put Blanca away they think I am a professional gunman. But I want *you*"—he placed a significant emphasis on the word—"to understand that there wasn't any other way to deal with Blanca. By coming back here after selling me that stolen Star stock and refusing to admit the deed in the presence of other people—even denying it and accusing me—he forced me to take the step I did

with him. Even then, I gave him his chance. That he didn't take it isn't my fault.

"I suppose I look pretty black to you, because I treated you like I did. But it was partly your fault, too. Maybe that's mysterious to you, but it will have to stay a mystery. I had an idea in my head that night—and something else. I've found something out since that makes me feel a lot sorry. If I had known what I know now, that wouldn't have happened to you—I've got my eyes open now."

Their ponies were very close together, and leaning over suddenly he placed both hands on her shoulders and gazed into her eyes, his own flashing with a strange light. She did not try to escape his hands, for she felt that his sincerity warranted the action.

"I've treated you mean, Sheila," he said; "about as mean as a man could treat a woman. I am sorry. I want you to believe that. And maybe some day—when this business is over—you'll understand and forgive me."

"This business?" Sheila drew back and

looked at him wonderingly. "What do you mean?"

There was no mirth in his laugh as he dropped his hands to his sides. Her question had brought about a return of that mocking reserve which she could not penetrate. Apparently he would let her no farther into the mystery whose existence his words had betrayed. He had allowed her to get a glimpse of his inner self; had shown her that he was not the despicable creature she had thought him; had apparently been about to take her into his confidence. And she had felt a growing sympathy for him and had been prepared to meet him half way in an effort to settle their differences, but she saw that the opportunity was gone—was hidden under the cloak of mystery which had been about him from the beginning of their acquaintance.

"This Doubler business," he answered, and she nibbled impatiently at her lips, knowing that he had meant something else.

"That's evasion," she said, looking straight at him, hoping that he would relent and speak.

"Is it?" In his unwavering eyes she saw a glint of grim humor. "Well, that's the answer. I am not going to kill Doubler—if it will do you any good to know. I don't kill my friends."

"Then," she said eagerly, catching at the hope which he held out to her, "father didn't hire you to kill him? You didn't talk to father about that?"

His lips curled. "Why don't you ask your father about that?"

The hope died within her. Dakota's words and manner implied that her father had tried to employ him to make way with the nester, but that he had refused. She had not been wrong—Duncan had not been wrong in his suspicion that her father was planning the death of the nester. Duncan's only mistake was in including Dakota in the scheme.

She had hoped against hope that she might discover that Duncan had been wrong altogether; that she had done her father an injury in believing him capable of deliberately planning a murder. She looked again at Dakota. There was no mistaking his

earnestness, she thought, for there was no evidence of deceit or knavery in his face, nor in the eyes that were steadily watching her.

She put her hands to her face and shivered, now thoroughly convinced of her father's guilt; feeling a sudden repugnance for him, for everybody and everything in the country, excepting Doubler.

She had done all she could, however, to prevent them killing Doubler—all she could do except to warn Doubler of his danger, and she would go to him immediately. Without looking again at Dakota she turned, dry eyed and pale, urging her pony up the trail toward the nester's cabin, leaving Dakota sitting silent in his saddle, watching her.

She lingered on the trail, riding slowly, halting when she came to a spot which offered a particularly good view of the country surrounding her, for in spite of her lonesomeness she could not help appreciating the beauty of the land, with its towering mountains, its blue sky, its vast, yawning distances, and the peacefulness which

seemed to be everywhere except in her heart.

She presently reached the Two Forks and urged her pony through the shallow water of its crossing, riding up the slight, intervening slope and upon a stretch of plain beside a timber grove. A little later she came to the corral gates, where she dismounted and hitched her pony to a rail, smiling to herself as she thought of how surprised Doubler would be to see her.

Then she left the corral gate and stole softly around a corner of the cabin, determined to steal upon Doubler unawares. Once at the corner, she halted and peered around. She saw Doubler lying in the open doorway, his body twisted into a peculiarly odd position, face down, his arms outstretched, his legs doubled under him.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHOT IN THE BACK

FOR an instant after discovering Doubler lying in the doorway, Sheila stood motionless at the corner of the cabin, looking down wonderingly at him. She thought at first that he was merely resting, but his body was doubled up so oddly that a grave doubt rose in her mind. A vague fear clutched at her heart, and she stood rigid, her eyes wide as she looked for some sign that would confirm her fears. And then she saw a moist red patch on his shirt on the right side just below the shoulder blade, and it seemed that a band of steel had been suddenly pressed down over her forehead. Something had happened to Doubler!

The world reeled, objects around her danced fantastically, the trees in the grove near her seemed to dip toward her in deri-

sion, her knees sagged and she held tightly to the corner of the cabin for support in her weakness.

She saw it all in a flash. Dakota had been to visit Doubler and had shot him. She had heard the shot. Duncan had been right, and Dakota—how she despised him now!—was probably even now picturing in his imagination the scene of her discovering the nester lying on his own threshold, murdered. An anger against him, which arose at the thought, did much to help her regain control of herself.

She must be brave now, for there might still be life in Doubler's body, and she went slowly toward him, cringing and shrinking, along the wall of the cabin.

She touched him first, lightly with the tips of her fingers, calling softly to him in a quavering voice. Becoming more bold, she took hold of him by the left shoulder and shook him slightly, and her heart seemed to leap within her when a faint moan escaped his lips. Her fear fled instantly as she realized that he was alive, that she had not to deal with a dead man.

Stifling a quivering sob she took hold of him again, tugging and pulling at him, trying to turn him over so that she might see his face. She observed that the red patch on his shoulder grew larger with the effort, and her face grew paler with apprehension, but convinced that she must persist she shut her eyes and tugged desperately at him, finally succeeding in pulling him over on his back.

He moaned again, though his face was ashen and lifeless, and with hope filling her heart she redoubled her efforts and finally succeeded in dragging him inside the cabin, out of the sun, where he lay inert, with wide-stretched arms, a gruesome figure to the girl.

Panting and exhausted, some stray wisps of hair sweeping her temples, the rest of it threatening to come tumbling down around her shoulders, she leaned against one of the door jambs, thinking rapidly. She ought to have help, of course, and her thoughts went to Dakota, riding unconcernedly away on the river trail. She could not go to him for assistance, such a course was not to be

considered, she would rather let Doubler die than to go to his murderer; she could never have endured the irony of such an action. Besides, she was certain that even were she to go to him, he would find some excuse to refuse her, for having shot the nester, he certainly would do nothing toward bringing the help which might possibly restore him to life.

She put aside the thought with a shudder of horror, yet conscious that something must be done for Doubler at once if he was to live. Perhaps it was already too late to go for assistance; there seemed to be but very little life in his body, and trembling with anxiety she decided that she must render him whatever aid she could. There was not much that she could do, to be sure, but if she could do something she might keep him alive until other help would come.

She stood beside the door jamb and watched him for some time, for she dreaded the idea of touching him again, but after a while her courage returned, and she again went to him, kneeling down beside him, laying her head on his breast and listening.

His heart was beating, faintly, but still it was beating, and she rose from him, determined.

She found a sheath knife in one of his pockets, and with this she cut the shirt away from the wound, discovering, when she drew the pieces of cloth away, that there was a large, round hole in his breast. She came near to swooning when she thought of the red patch on his back, for that seemed to prove that the bullet had gone clear through him. It had missed a vital spot, though, she thought, for it seemed to be rather high on the shoulder.

She got some water from a pail that stood just inside the door, and with this and some white cloth which she tore from one of her skirts, she bathed and bandaged the wound and laid a wet cloth on his forehead. She tried to force some of the water down his throat, but he could not swallow, lying there with closed eyes and drawing his breath in short, painful gasps.

After she had worked with him for a quarter of an hour or more she stood up, convinced that she had done all she could

for him and that the next move would be to get a doctor.

She had heard Duncan say that it was fifty miles to Dry Bottom, and she knew that it was at least forty to Lazette. She had never heard anyone mention that there was a doctor nearer, and so of course she would have to go to Lazette—ten miles would make a great difference.

She might ride to the Double R ranch-house, and she thought of going there, but it was at least ten miles off the Lazette trail, and even though at the Double R she might get a cowboy to make the ride to Lazette, she would be losing much valuable time. She drew a deep breath over the contemplation of the long ride—at best it would take her four hours—but she did not hesitate long and with a last glance at Doubler she was out of the door and walking to the corral, where she unhitched her pony, mounted, and sent the animal over the level toward the crossing at a sharp gallop.

Once over the crossing and on the river trail where the riding was better, she held the pony to an even, steady pace. One

mile, two miles, five or six she rode with her hair flying in the breeze, her cheeks pale, except for a bright red spot in the center of each—which betrayed the excitement under which she was laboring. There was a resolute gleam in her eyes, though, and she rode lightly, helping her pony as much as possible. However, the animal was fresh and did not seem to mind the pace, cavorting and lunging up the rises and pulling hard on the reins on the levels, showing a desire to run. She held it in, though, realizing that during the forty mile ride the animal would have plenty of opportunity to prove its mettle.

She reached and passed the quicksand crossing from which she had been pulled by Dakota, the pony running with the sure regularity of a machine, and was on a level which led into some hills directly ahead, when the pony stumbled.

She tried to jerk it erect with the reins, but in spite of the effort she felt it sink under her, and with a sensation of dismay clutching at her heart she slid out of the saddle.

A swift examination showed her that the

pony's right fore-leg was deep in the sand of the trail, and she surmised instantly that it had stepped into a prairie dog hole. When she went to it and raised its head it looked appealingly at her, and she stifled a groan of sympathy and began looking about for some means to extricate it.

She found this no easy task, for the pony's leg was deep in the sand, and when she finally dug a space around it with a branch of tree which she procured from a nearby grove, the animal struggled out, only to limp badly. The leg, Sheila decided, after a quick examination, was not broken, but badly sprained, and she knew enough about horses to be certain that the injured pony would never be able to carry her to Lazette.

She would be forced to go to the Double R now, there was nothing else that she could do. Standing beside the pony, debating whether she had not better walk than try to ride him, even to the Double R, she heard a clatter of hoofs and turned to see Dakota riding the trail toward her. He was traveling in the direction she had been traveling when the accident had happened, and ap-

parently had left the trail somewhere back in the distance, or she would have seen him. Perhaps, she speculated, with a flash of dull anger, he had followed her near to Doubler's cabin, perhaps had been near when she had dragged the wounded nester into it.

His first word showed her that there was ground for this suspicion. He drew up beside her and looked at her with a queer smile, and she, aware of his guilt, wondered at his composure.

"You didn't stay long at Doubler's shack," he said. "I was on a ridge, back on the trail a ways, and I saw you hitting the breeze away from there some rapid. I was thinking to intercept you, but you went tearing by so fast that I didn't get a chance. You're in an awful hurry. What's wrong?"

"You ought to know that," she said, bitterly angry because of his pretended serenity. "You—you murderer!"

His face paled instantly, but his voice was clear and sharp.

"Murderer?" he said sternly. "Who has been murdered?"

“You don’t know, of course,” she said scornfully, her face flaming, her eyes alight with loathing and contempt. “You shot him and then let me ride on alone to—to find him, shot—shot in the back! Oh!”

She shuddered at the recollection, held her hands over her eyes for an instant to keep from looking at the expression of amazement in his eyes, and while she stood thus she heard a movement, and withdrew her hands from her eyes to see him standing beside her, so close that his body touched hers, his eyes ablaze with curiosity and interest and repressed anxiety. She cringed and cried with pain as he seized her arm and twisted her forcibly around so that she faced him.

“Stop this fooling and tell me what has happened!” he said, with short, incisive accents. “Who did you find shot? Who has been murdered?”

Oh, it was admirable acting, she told herself as she tore herself away from him and stood back a little, her eyes flashing with scorn and horror. “You don’t know, of course,” she flared. “You shot him—shot

him in the back and sent me on to find him. You gloried in the thought of me finding him dead. But he isn't dead, thank God, and will live, if I can get a doctor, to accuse you!" She pointed a finger at him, but he ignored it and took a step toward her, his eyes cold and boring into hers.

"Who?" he demanded. "Who?"

"Ben Doubler. Oh!" she cried, in an excess of rage and horror, "to think that I should have to tell you!"

But if he heard her last words he paid no attention to them, for he was suddenly at his pony's side, buckling the cinches tighter. She watched him, fascinated at the repressed energy of his movements, and became so interested that she started when he suddenly looked up at her.

"He isn't dead, then," he said rapidly, sharply, the words coming with short, metallic snaps. "You were going to Lazette for a doctor. I'm glad I happened along—glad I saw you. I'll be able to make better time than you."

"Where are you going?" she demanded, scarcely having heard his words, though

aware that he was preparing to leave. She took a step forward and seized his pony's bridle rein, her eyes blazing with wrath over the thought that he should attempt to deceive her with so bald a ruse.

"For the doctor," he said shortly. "This is no time for melodramatics, ma'am, if Doubler is badly hurt. Will you please let go of that bridle?"

"Do you think," she demanded, her cheeks aflame, her hair, loosened from the long ride, straggling over her temples and giving her a singularly disheveled appearance, "that I am going to let you go for the doctor? You!"

"This isn't a case where your feelings should be considered, ma'am," he said. "If Ben Doubler has been hurt like you think he has I'm going to get the doctor mighty sudden, whether you think I ought to or not!"

"You won't!" she declared, stamping a foot furiously. "You shot him and now you want to disarm suspicion by going after the doctor for him. But you won't! I won't let you!"

"You'll have to," he said rapidly. "The doctor isn't at Lazette; he is over on Carizzo Creek, taking care of Dave Moreland's wife, who is down bad. I saw Dave yesterday, and he was telling me about her; that the doctor is to stay there until she is out of danger. You don't know where Moreland's place is. Be sensible, now," he said gruffly. "I'll talk to you later about you suspecting me."

"You shan't go," she protested; "I am going myself. I will find Moreland's place. I can't let you go—it would be horrible!"

For answer he swung quickly down from the saddle, seized her by the waist, disengaged her hands from the bridle rein, and picking her up bodily carried her, struggling and fighting and striking blindly at his face, to the side of the trail. When he set her down he pinned her arms to her sides. He did not speak, and she was entirely helpless in his grasp, but when he released his grasp of her arms and tried to leave her she seized the collar of his vest. With a grim laugh he slipped out of the garment, leaving it dangling from her hand.

"Keep it for me, ma'am," he said with a cold chuckle. "But get back to Doubler's cabin and see what you can do for him. You'll be able to do a lot. I'll be back with the doctor before sundown."

In an instant he was at his pony's side, mounting with the animal at a run, and in a brief space had vanished around a turn in the trail, leaving a cloud of dust to mark the spot where Shelia had seen him disappear.

For a long time Sheila stood beside the trail, looking at the spot where he had disappeared, holding his vest with an unconscious grasp. Looking down she saw it and with an exclamation of rage threw it from her, watching it fall into the sand. But after an instant she went over and took it up, recovering, at the same time, a black leather pocket memoranda which had slipped out of it. She put the memoranda back into one of the pockets, handling both the book and the vest gingerly, for she felt an aversion to touching them. She conquered this feeling long enough to tuck the vest into the slicker behind the saddle, and then she

mounted and sent her pony up the trail toward Doubler's cabin.

She found Doubler where she had left him, and he was still unconscious. The water pail was empty and she went down to the river and refilled it, returning to the cabin and again bathing and bandaging Doubler's wound, and placing a fresh cloth on his forehead.

For a time she sat watching the injured man, revolving the incident of her discovery of him in her mind, going over and over again the gruesome details. She did not dwell long on the latter, for she could not prevent her mind reviewing Dakota's words and actions—his satanic cleverness in pretending to be on the verge of taking her into his confidence, his prediction that she would understand when this "business" was over. She did not need to wait, she understood now!

Finding the silence in the cabin irksome, she rose, placed Doubler's head in a more comfortable position, and went outside into the bright sunshine of the afternoon. She took a turn around the corral, abstractedly

watched the awkward antics of several yearlings which were penned in a corner, and then returned to the cabin door, where she sat on the edge of the step.

Near the side of the cabin door, leaning against the wall, she saw a rifle. She started, not remembering to have seen it there before, but presently she found courage to take it up gingerly, turning it over and over in her hands.

Some initials had been carved on the stock and she examined them, making them out finally as "B. D."—Doubler's. Examining the weapon she found an empty shell in the chamber, and she nearly dropped the rifle when the thought struck her that perhaps Doubler had been shot with it. She set it down quickly, shuddering, and for diversion walked to her pony, examining the injured leg and rubbing it, the pony nickering gratefully. Returning to the cabin she sat for a long time on the step, but she did not again take up the rifle. Several times while she sat on the step she heard Doubler moan, and once she got up and went to him, again bathing his wound, but returning in-

stantly to the door step, for she could not bear the silence of the interior.

Suddenly remembering Dakota's vest and the black leather memoranda which had dropped from one of the pockets, she got up again and went to the bench where she had laid the garment, taking out the book and regarding it with some curiosity.

There was nothing on the cover to suggest what might be the nature of its contents—time had worn away any printing that might have been on it. She hesitated, debating the propriety of an examination, but her curiosity got the better of her and with a sharp glance at Doubler she turned her back and opened the book.

Almost the first object that caught her gaze was a piece of paper, detached from the leaves, with some writing on it. The writing seemed unimportant, but as she turned it, intending to replace it between the leaves of the book, she saw her father's name, and she read, holding her breath with dread, for fresh in her mind was Duncan's charge that her father had entered into an agreement with Dakota for the murder of

Doubler. She read the words several times, standing beside the bench and swaying back and forth, a sudden weakness gripping her.

“One month from to-day”—ran the words—“I promise to pay to Dakota the sum of six thousand dollars in consideration of his rights and interest in the Star brand, provided that within one month from date he persuades Ben Doubler to leave Union County.”

Signed: “David Dowd Langford.”

There it was—conclusive, damning evidence of her father’s guilt—and of Dakota’s!

How cleverly that last clause covered the evil intent of the document! Sheila read it again and again with dry eyes. Her horror and grief were too great for tears. She felt that the discovery of the paper removed the last lingering doubt, and though she had been partially prepared for proof, she had not been prepared to have it thrust so quickly and convincingly before her.

How long she sat on the door step she did not know, or care, for at a stroke she had lost all interest in everything in the country.

Even its people interested her only to the point of loathing—they were murderers, even her father. Time represented to her nothing now except a dreary space which, if she endured, would bring the moment in which she could leave. For within the last few minutes she seemed to have been robbed of all the things which had made existence here endurable and she was determined to end it all. When she finally got up and looked about her she saw that the sun had traveled quite a distance down the sky. A sorrowful smile reached her face as she watched it. It was going away, and before it could complete another circle she would go too—back to the East from where she had come, where there were at least *some* friends who could be depended upon to commit no atrocious crimes.

No plan of action formed in her mind; she could not think lucidly with the knowledge that her father was convicted of complicity in an attempted murder.

Would she be able to face her father again? To bid him good-bye? She thought not. It would be better for both if she de-

parted without him being aware of her going. He would not care, she told herself bitterly; lately he had withheld from her all those little evidences of affection to which she had grown accustomed, and it would not be hard for him, he would not miss her, perhaps would even be glad of her absence, for then he could continue his murderous schemes without fear of her "meddling" with them.

There was a fascination in the paper on which was written the signed agreement. She read it carefully again, and then concealed it in her bodice, pinning it there so that it would not become lost. Then she rose and went into the cabin, placing the memoranda on a shelf where Dakota would be sure to find it when he returned with the doctor. She did not care to read anything contained in it.

Marveling at her coolness, she went outside again and resumed her seat on the door step. It was not such a blow to her, after all, and there arose in her mind as she sat on the step a wonder as to how her father would act were she to confront him with

274 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

evidence of his guilt. Perhaps she would not show him the paper, but she finally became convinced that she must talk to him, must learn from him in some manner his connection with the attempted murder of Doubler. Then, after receiving from him some sign which would convince her, she would take her belongings and depart for the East, leaving him to his own devices.

Looking up at the sun, she saw that it still had quite a distance to travel before it reached the mountains. Stealing into the cabin, she once more fixed the bandages on the wounded man. Then she went out, mounted her pony, and rode through the shallow water of the crossing toward the Double R ranch.

CHAPTER XIV

LANGFORD LAYS OFF THE MASK

THE sun was still an hour above the horizon when Sheila rode up to the corral gates. While removing the saddle and bridle from her pony she noted with satisfaction that the horse which her father had been accustomed to ride was inside the corral. Therefore her father was somewhere about.

Hanging the saddle and bridle from a rail of the corral fence, she went into the house to find that Langford was not there. Duncan's sister curtly informed her that she had seen him a few minutes before down at the stables. Sheila went into the office, which was a lean-to addition to the ranch-house, and seating herself at her father's desk picked up a six month's old copy of a magazine and tried to read.

Finding that she could not concentrate her thoughts, she dropped the magazine into her lap and leaned back with a sigh. From where she sat she had a good view of the stables, and fifteen minutes later, while she still watched, she saw Langford come out of one of the stable doors and walk toward the house. She felt absolutely no emotion whatever over his coming; there was only a mild curiosity in her mind as to the manner in which he would take the news of her intended departure from the Double R. She observed, with a sort of detached interest, that he looked twice at her saddle and bridle as he passed them, and so of course he surmised that she had come in from her ride. For a moment she lost sight of him behind some buildings, and then he opened the door of the office and entered.

He stopped on the threshold for an instant and looked at her, evidently expecting her to offer her usual greeting. He frowned slightly when it did not come, and then smiled.

"Hello!" he said cordially. "You are back, I see. And tired," he added, noting,

her position. He walked over and laid a hand on her forehead and she involuntarily shrank from his touch, shuddering, for the hand which he had placed on her forehead was the right one—the hand with which he had signed the agreement with Dakota—Doubler's death warrant.

"Don't, please," she said.

"Cross, too?" he said jocularly.

"Just tired," she lied listlessly, and with an air of great indifference.

He looked critically at her for an instant, then smiled again and dragged a chair over near a window and looked out, apparently little concerned over her manner. But she noted that he glanced furtively at her several times, and that he seemed greatly satisfied over something. She wondered if he had seen Dakota; if he knew that the latter had already attempted to carry out the agreement to "Persuade Doubler to leave the county."

"Ride far?" he questioned, turning and facing her, his voice casual.

"Not very far."

"The river trail?"

Sheila nodded, and saw a sudden interest flash into his eyes.

"Which way?" he asked quickly.

"Down," she returned. She had not lied, for she *had* ridden "down," and though she had also ridden up the river she preferred to let him guess a little, for she resented the curiosity in his voice and was determined to broach the subject which she had in mind in her own time and after the manner that suited her best.

He had not been interested in her for a long time, had not appeared to care where she spent her time. Why should he betray interest now? She saw a mysterious smile on his face and knew before he spoke that his apparent interest in her was not genuine—that he was merely curious.

"Then you haven't heard the news?" he said softly. He was looking out of the window now, and she could not see his face.

She took up the magazine and turned several pages, pretending to read, but in reality waiting for him to continue. When he made no effort to do so her own curiosity got the better of her.

"What news?" she questioned, without looking at him.

"About Doubler," he said. "He is dead."

Her surprise was genuine, and her hands trembled as the leaves of the magazine fluttered and closed. Had the nester died since she had left his cabin? A moment's thought convinced her that this could not be the explanation, for assuredly she would have seen anyone who had arrived at Doubler's cabin; she had scanned the surrounding country before and after leaving the vicinity of the crossing and had seen no signs of anyone. Besides, Langford's news seemed to have abided with him a long time—it seemed to her that he had known it for hours. She could not tell why she felt this, but she was certain that he had not received word recently—within an hour or two at any rate—unless he had seen Dakota.

This seemed to be the secret of his knowledge, and the more she considered the latter's excitement during her meeting with him on the trail, the more fully she became convinced that Langford had talked to him.

The latter's anxiety to relieve her of the task of riding to Lazette for the doctor had been spurious; he had merely wanted to be the first to carry the news of Doubler's death to Langford, and after leaving her he had undoubtedly taken a roundabout trail for the Double R. Possibly by this time he had settled with Langford and was on his way out of the country.

"Dead?" she said, turning to Langford. "Who——" In her momentary excitement she had come very near to asking him who had brought him the news. She hesitated, for she saw a glint of surprise and suspicion in his eyes.

"My dear girl, did I say that he had been 'killed'?"

His smile was without humor. Evidently he had expected that she had been about to ask who had killed the nester.

He looked at her steadily, an intolerant smile playing about the corners of his mouth. "I am aware that you have been suspicious of me ever since you heard that I had a quarrel with Doubler. But, thank God, my dear, I have not that crime to an-

swer for. Doubler, however, has been killed—murdered.”

Sheila repressed a desire to shudder, and turned from Langford so that he would not be able to see the disgust that had come into her eyes over the discovery that in addition to being a murderer her father was that most despicable of all living things—a hypocrite! It required all of her composure to be able to look at him again.

“Who killed him?” she asked evenly.

“Dakota, my dear.”

“Dakota!” She pronounced the name abstractedly, for she was surprised at the admission.

“How do you know that Dakota killed him?” she said, looking straight at him. He changed color, though his manner was still smooth and his smile bland.

“Duncan was fortunate enough to be in the vicinity when the deed was committed,” he told her. “And he saw Dakota shoot him in the back. With his own rifle, too.”

There was a quality in his voice which hinted at satisfaction; a peculiar emphasis on the word “fortunate” which caused

Sheila to wonder why he should consider it fortunate that Duncan had seen the murder done, when it would have been much better for the success of Dakota's and her father's scheme if there had been no witness to it at all.

"However," continued Langford, with a sigh of resignation that caused Sheila a shiver of repugnance and horror, "Doubler's death will not be a very great loss to the country. Duncan tells me that he has long been suspected of cattle stealing, and sooner or later he would have been caught in the act. And as for Dakota," he laughed harshly, with a note of suppressed triumph that filled her with an unaccountable resentment; "Dakota is an evil in the country, too. Do you remember how he killed that Mexican half-breed over in Lazette that day?—the day I came? Wanton murder, I call it. Such a man is a danger and a menace, and I shall not be sorry to see him hanged for killing Doubler."

"Then you will have Duncan charge Dakota with the murder?"

"Of course, my dear; why shouldn't I?

Assuredly you would not allow Dakota to go unpunished?"

"No," said Sheila, "Doubler's murderer should be punished."

Two things were now fixed in her mind as certainties. Dakota had not been to see her father since she had left him on the river trail; he had not received his blood-money—would never receive it. Her father had no intention of living up to his agreement with Dakota and intended to allow him to be hanged. She thought of the signed agreement in her bodice. Langford had given it to Dakota, but she had little doubt that in case Dakota still had it in his possession and dared to produce it, Langford would deny having made it—would probably term it a forgery. It was harmless, too; who would be likely to intimate that the clause regarding Dakota inducing Doubler to leave the country meant that Langford had hired Dakota to kill the nester? Sheila sat silent, looking at Langford, wondering how it happened that he had been able to masquerade so long before her; why she had permitted herself to love

a being so depraved, so entirely lacking in principle.

But a thrill of hope swept over her. Perhaps Doubler would not die? She had been considering the situation from the viewpoint of the nester's death, but if Dakota had really been in earnest and had gone for a doctor, there was a chance that the tragedy which seemed so imminent would be turned into something less serious. Immediately her spirits rose and she was able to smile quietly at Langford when he continued:

"Dakota will be hung, of course; decency demands it. When Duncan came to me with the news I sent him instantly to Lazette to inform the sheriff of what had happened. Undoubtedly he will take Dakota into custody at once."

"But not for murder," said Sheila evenly, unable to keep a quiver of triumph out of her voice.

"Not?" said Langford, startled. "Why not?"

"Because," returned Sheila, enjoying the sudden consternation that was revealed in her father's face, and drawling her words

a little to further confound him; "because Doubler isn't dead."

"Not dead!" Langford's jaws sagged, and he sat looking at Sheila with wide, staring, vacuous eyes. "Not dead?" he repeated hoarsely. "Why, Duncan told me he had examined him, that he had been shot through the lungs and had bled to death before he left him! How do you know that he is not dead?" he suddenly demanded, leaning toward her, a wild hope in his eyes.

"I went to his cabin before noon," said Sheila. "I found him lying in the doorway. He had been shot through the right side, near the shoulder, but not through the lung, and he was still alive. I dragged him into the cabin and did what I could for him. Then I started for the doctor."

"For the doctor?" he said incredulously. "Then how does it happen that you are here? You couldn't possibly ride to Lazette and return by this time!"

"I believe I said that I 'started' for the doctor," said Sheila with a quiet smile. She was enjoying his excitement. "I met Dakota on the trail, and he went."

Langford continued to stare at her; it seemed that he could not realize the truth. Then suddenly he was out of his chair and standing over her, his face bloated poisonously, his eyes ablaze with a malignant light.

"Damn you!" he shrieked. "This is what comes of your infernal meddling! What business had you to interfere? Why didn't you let him die? I've a notion——"

His hands clenched and unclenched before her eyes, and she sat with blanched face, certain that he was about to attack her—perhaps kill her. She did not seem to care much, however, and looked up into his face steadily and defiantly.

After a moment, however, he regained control of himself, leaving her side and pacing rapidly back and forth in the office, cursing bitterly.

Curiously, Sheila was not surprised at this outburst; she had rather expected it since she had become aware of his real character. Nor was she surprised to discover that he had dropped pretense altogether—he was bound to do that sooner or later. Her only surprise was at her own feelings.

She did not experience the slightest concern over him—it was as though she were talking to a stranger. She was interested to the point of taking a grim enjoyment out of his confusion, but beyond that she was not interested in anything.

It made little difference to her what became of Langford, Dakota, Duncan—any of them, except Doubler. She intended to return to the nester's cabin, to help the doctor make him comfortable—for he had been the only person in the country who had shown her any kindness; he was the only one who had not wronged her, and she was grateful to him.

Langford was standing over her again, his breath coming short and fast.

“Where did you see Dakota?” he questioned hoarsely. “Answer!” he added, when she did not speak immediately.

“On the river trail.”

“Before you found Doubler?”

“Before, yes—and after. I met him twice.”

She discerned his motive in asking these questions, but it made no difference to her

and she answered truthfully. She did not intend to shield Dakota; the fact that Doubler had not been killed outright did not lessen the gravity of the offense in her eyes.

"Before you found Doubler!" Langford's voice came with a vicious snap. "You met him coming from Doubler's cabin, I suppose?"

"Yes," she answered wearily, "I met him coming from there. I was on the trail—going there—and I heard the shot. I know Dakota killed him."

Langford made an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Well, it isn't so bad, after all. You'll have to be a witness against Dakota. And very likely Doubler will die—probably is dead by this time; will certainly be dead before the Lazette doctor can reach his cabin. No, my dear," he added, smiling at Sheila, "it isn't so bad, after all."

Sheila rose. Her poignant anger against him was equaled only by her disgust. He expected her to bear witness against Dakota; desired her to participate in his scheme

to fasten upon the latter the entire blame for the commission of a crime in which he himself was the moving factor.

"I shall not bear witness against him," she told Langford coldly. "For I am going away—back East—to-morrow. Don't imagine that I have been in complete ignorance of what has been going on; that I have been unaware of the part you have played in the shooting of Doubler. I have known for quite a long while that you had decided to have Doubler murdered, and only recently I learned that you hired Dakota to kill him. And this morning, when I met Dakota on the river trail, he dropped this from a pocket of his vest." She fumbled at her bodice and produced the signed agreement, holding it out to him.

As she expected, he repudiated it, though his face paled a little as he read it.

"This is a forgery, my dear," he said, in the old, smooth, even voice that she had grown to despise.

"No," she returned calmly, "it is not a forgery. You forget that only a minute ago you practically admitted it to be a true

agreement by telling me that I should have allowed Doubler to die. You are an accomplice in the shooting of Doubler, and if I am compelled to testify in Dakota's trial I shall tell everything I know."

She watched while he lighted a match, held it to the paper, smiling as the licking flames consumed it. He was entirely composed now, and through the gathering darkness of the interior of the office she saw a sneer come into his face.

"I shall do all I can to assist you to discontinue the associations which are so distasteful to you. You will start for the East immediately, I presume?"

"To-morrow," she said. "In the afternoon. I shall have my trunks taken over to Lazette in the morning."

"In the morning?" said Langford, puzzled. "Why not ride over with them, in the afternoon, in the buckboard?"

"I shall ride my pony. The man can return him." She took a step toward the door, but halted before reaching it, turning to look back at him.

"I don't think it is necessary for me to

say good-by. But you have not treated me badly in the past, and I thank you—for that—and wish you well.”

“Where are you going?”

Sheila had walked to the door and stood with one hand on the latch. He came and stood beside her, a suppressed excitement in his manner, his eyes gleaming brightly in the dusk which had suddenly fallen.

“I think I told you that before. Ben Doubler is alone, and he needs care. I am going to him—to stay with him until the doctor arrives. He will die if someone does not take care of him.”

“You are determined to continue to meddle, are you?” he said, his voice quivering with anger, his lips working strangely. “I am sick of your damned interference. Sick of it, I tell you!” His voice lowered to a harsh, throaty whisper. “You won’t leave this office until to-morrow afternoon! Do you hear? What business is it of yours if Doubler dies?”

Sheila did not answer, but pressed the door latch. His arm suddenly interposed, his fingers closing on her arm, gripping it

so tightly that she cried out with pain. Then suddenly his fingers were boring into her shoulders; she was twisted, helpless in his brutal grasp, and flung bodily into the chair beside the desk, where she sat, sobbing breathlessly.

She did not cry out again, but sat motionless, her lips quivering, rubbing her shoulders where his iron fingers had sunk into the flesh, her soul filled with a revolting horror for his brutality.

For a moment there was no movement. Then, in the semi-darkness she saw him leave the door; watched him as he approached a shelf on which stood a kerosene lamp, lifted the chimney and applied a match to the wick. For an instant after replacing the chimney he stood full in the glare of light, his face contorted with rage, his eyes gleaming with venom.

“Now you know exactly where I stand, you—you huzzy!” he said, grinning satyrically as she winced under the insult. “I’m your father, damn you! Your father—do you hear? And I’ll not have you go back East to gab and gossip about me. You’ll

stay here, and you'll bear witness against Dakota, and you'll keep quiet about me!" He was trembling horribly as he came close to her, and his breath was coughing in his throat shrilly.

"I won't do anything of the kind!" Sheila got to her feet, and stood, rigid with anger, her eyes flaming defiance. "I am going to Doubler's cabin this minute, and if you molest me again I shall go to the sheriff with my story!"

He seemed about to attack her again, and his hands were raised as though to grasp her throat, when there came a sound at the door, it swung open, and Dakota stepped in, closing the door behind him.

Dakota's face was white—white as it had been that other day at the quicksand crossing when Sheila had looked up to see him sitting on his pony, watching her. There was an entire absence of excitement in his manner, though; no visible sign to tell that what he had seen on entering the cabin disturbed him in the least. Yet the whiteness of his face belied this apparent composure. It seemed to Sheila that his eyes be-

trayed the strong emotion that was gripping him.

She retreated to the chair beside the desk and sank into it. Langford had wheeled and was now facing Dakota, a shallow smile on his face.

There was a smile on Dakota's face, too; a mysterious, cold, prepared grin that fascinated Sheila as she watched him. The smile faded a little when he spoke to Langford, his voice vibrating, as though he had been running.

"When you're fighting a woman, Langford, you ought to make sure there isn't a man around!"

Mingling with Sheila's recognition of the obvious and admirable philosophy of this statement was a realization that Dakota must have been riding hard. There was much dust on his clothing, the scarf at his neck was thick with it; it streaked his face, his voice was husky, his lips dry.

Langford did not answer him, stepping back against the desk and regarding him with a mirthless, forced smile which, Sheila was certain, he had assumed in order to con-

ceal his fear of the man who stood before him.

“So you haven’t got any thoughts just at this minute,” said Dakota with cold insinuation. “You are one of those men who can talk bravely enough to women, but who can’t think of anything exactly proper for a man to hear. Well, you’ll do your talking later.” He looked at Shelia, ignoring Langford completely.

“I expect you’ve been wondering, ma’am, why I’m here, when I ought to be over at the Two Forks, trying to do something for Doubler. But the doctor’s there, taking care of him. The reason I’ve come is that I’ve found this in Doubler’s cabin.” He drew out the memoranda which Sheila had placed on the shelf in the cabin, holding it up so that she might see.

“You took my vest,” he went on. “And I was looking for it. I found it all right, but something was missing. You’re the only one who has been to Doubler’s cabin since I left there, I expect, and it must have been you who opened this book. It isn’t in the same shape it was when you pulled it off

me when I was talking to you down there on the river trail—something has been taken out of it, a paper. That's why I rode over here—to see if you'd got it. Have you, ma'am?"

Sheila pointed mutely to the floor, where a bit of thin, crinkled ash was all that remained of the signed agreement.

"Burned!" said Dakota sharply.

He caught Sheila's nod and questioned coldly:

"Who burned it?"

"My—Mr. Langford," returned Sheila.

"You found it and showed it to him, and he burned it," said Dakota slowly. "Why?"

"Don't you see?" Sheila's eyes mocked Langford as she intercepted his gaze, which had been fixed on Dakota. "It was evidence against him," she concluded, indicating her father.

"I reckon I see." The smile was entirely gone out of Dakota's face now, and as he turned to look at Langford there was an expression in his eyes which chilled the latter.

"You've flunked on the agreement.

You've burned it—won't recognize it, eh? Well, I'm not any surprised."

Langford had partially recovered from the shock occasioned by Dakota's unexpected appearance, and he shook his head in emphatic, brazen denial.

"There was no agreement between us, my friend," he said. "The paper I burned was a forgery."

Dakota's lips hardened. "You called me your friend once before, Langford," he said coldly. "Don't do it again or I'll forget that you are Sheila's father. I reckon she has told you about Doubler. That's why I came over here to get the paper, for I knew that if you got hold of it you'd make short work of it. I know something else." He took a step forward and tried to hold Langford's gaze, his own eyes filled with a snapping menace. "I know that you've sent Duncan to Lazette for the sheriff. The doctor told me he'd met him,—Duncan—and the doctor says Duncan told him that you'd said that I fixed Doubler. How do you know I did?"

"Duncan saw you," said Langford.

Dakota's lips curled. "Duncan tell you that?" he questioned.

At Langford's nod he laughed harshly. "So it's a plant, eh?" he said, with a mirthless chuckle. "You are figuring to get two birds with one stone—Doubler and me. You've already got Doubler, or think you have, and now it's my turn. It does look pretty bad for me, for a fact, doesn't it? You've burned the agreement you made with me, so that you could slip out of your obligation. I reckon you think that after the sheriff gets me you'll be able to take the Star without any trouble—like you expect to take Doubler's land.

"You've got Duncan to swear that he saw me do for Doubler, and you've got your daughter to testify that she saw me on the trail, coming from Doubler's cabin right after she heard the shooting. It was a right clever scheme, but it was my fault for letting you get anything on me—I ought to have known that you'd try some dog's trick or other."

His voice was coming rapidly, sharply, and was burdened with a lashing sarcasm.

“ Yes, it’s a right clever scheme, Mister Langford, and it ought to be successful. But there’s one thing you’ve forgot. I’ve lived too long in this country to let anyone tangle me up like you’d like to have me. When a man gets double crossed in this country, he can’t go to the law for redress—he makes his own laws. I’m making mine. You’ve double crossed me, and damn your hide, I’m going to send you over the divide in a hurry! ”

One of his heavy revolvers leaped from its holster and showed for an instant in his right hand. Sheila had been watching closely, forewarned by Dakota’s manner, and when she saw his right hand drop to the holster she sprang upon him, catching the weapon by the muzzle.

Langford had covered his face with his hands, and stood beside the desk, trembling, and Sheila cried aloud in protest when she saw Dakota draw the weapon that swung at his other hip, holding her off with the hand which she had seized. But when Dakota saw Langford’s hands go to his face he hesitated, smiling scornfully. He turned to

Sheila, looking down at her face close to his, his smile softening.

"I forgot," he said gently; "I forgot he is your father."

"It isn't that," she said. "He isn't my father, any more. But—" she looked at Dakota pleadingly—"please don't shoot him. Go—leave the country. You have plenty of time. You have enough to answer for. Please go!"

For answer he grasped her by the shoulders, swinging her around so that she faced him,—as he had forced her to face him that day on the river trail—and there was a regretful, admiring gleam in his eyes.

"You told him—" he jerked a thumb toward Langford—"that you wouldn't bear witness against me. I heard you. You're a true blue girl, and your father's a fool or he wouldn't lose you, like he is going to lose you. If I had you I would take mighty good care that you didn't get away from me. You've given me some mighty good advice, and I would act on it if I was guilty of shooting Doubler. But I didn't shoot him—your father and Duncan have framed up on

me. Doubler isn't dead yet, and so I'm not running away. If Doubler had someone to nurse him, he might—" He hesitated and looked at her with a strange smile. "You think I shot Doubler, too, don't you? Well, there's a chance that if we can get Doubler revived he can tell who did shoot him. Do you want to know the truth? I heard you say a while ago, while I was standing at the window, looking in at your father giving a demonstration of his love for you, that you intended going over to Doubler's shack to nurse him. If you're still of the same mind, I'll take you over there."

Sheila was at the door in an instant, but halted on the threshold to listen to Dakota's parting word to Langford.

"Mister man," he said enigmatically, "there's just one thing that I want to say to you. There's a day coming when you'll think thoughts—plenty of them."

In a flash he had stepped outside the door and closed it after him.

A few minutes later, still standing beside the desk, Langford heard the rapid beat of hoofs on the hard sand of the corral yard.

302 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

Faint they became, and their rhythmic beat faster, until they died away entirely. But Dakota's words still lingered in Langford's mind, and it seemed to him that they conveyed a prophecy.

CHAPTER IV

THE PARTING ON THE RIVER TRAIL

“**I**’LL be leaving you now, ma’am.” There was a good moon, and its mellow light streamed full into Dakota’s grim, travel-stained face as he halted his pony on the crest of a slope above the Two Forks and pointed out a light that glimmered weakly through the trees on a level some distance on the other side of the river.

“There’s Doubler’s cabin—where you see that light,” he continued, speaking to Sheila in a low voice. “You’ve been there before, and you won’t get lost going the rest of the way alone. Do what you can for Doubler. I’m going down to my shack. I’ve done a heap of riding to-day, and I don’t feel exactly like I want to keep going on, unless it’s important. Besides, maybe Doubler will get along a whole lot better if I don’t hang around there. At least, he’ll do as well.”

Sheila had turned her head from him. He was exhibiting a perfectly natural aversion toward visiting the man he had nearly killed, she assured herself with a shudder, and she felt no pity for him. He had done her a service, however, in appearing at the Double R at a most opportune time, and she was grateful. Therefore she lingered, finding it hard to choose words.

"I am sorry," she finally said.

"Thank you," He maneuvered his pony until the moonlight streamed in her face. "I reckon you've got the same notion as your father—that I shot Doubler?" he said, watching her narrowly. "You are willing to take Duncan's word for it?"

"Duncan's word, and the agreement which I found in the pocket of your vest," she returned, without looking at him. "I suppose that is proof enough?"

"Well," he said with a bitter laugh, "it does look bad for me, for a fact. I can't deny that. And I don't blame you for thinking as you do. But you heard what I told your father about the shooting of Doubler being a plant."

“A plant?”

“A scheme, a plot—to make an innocent man seem guilty. That is what has been done with me. I didn’t shoot Doubler. I wouldn’t shoot him.”

She looked at him now, unbelief in her eyes.

“Of course you would deny it,” she said.

“Well,” he said resignedly, “I reckon that’s all. I can’t say that I expected anything else. I’ve done some things in my life that I’ve regretted, but I’ve never told a lie when the truth would do as well. There is no reason now why I should lie, and so I want you to know that I am telling the truth when I say that I didn’t shoot Doubler. Won’t you believe me?”

“No,” she returned, unaffected by the earnestness in his voice. “You were at Doubler’s cabin when I heard the shot—I met you on the trail. You killed that man, Blanca, over in Lazette, for nothing. You didn’t need to kill him; you shot him in pure wantonness. But you killed Doubler for money. You would have killed my father had I not been there to prevent you. Per-

haps you can't help killing people. You have my sympathy on that account, and I hope that in time you will do better—will reform. But I don't believe you."

"You forgot to mention one other crime," he reminded her in a low voice, not without a trace of sarcasm.

"I have not forgotten it. I will never forget it. But I forgive you, for in comparison to your other crimes your sin against me was trivial—though it was great enough."

Again his bitter laugh reached her ears. "I thought," he began, and then stopped short. "Well, I reckon it doesn't make much difference what I thought. I would have to tell you many things before you would understand, and even then I suppose you wouldn't believe me. So I am keeping quiet until—until the time comes. Maybe that won't be so long, and then you'll understand. I'll be seeing you again."

"I am leaving this country to-morrow," she informed him coldly.

She saw him start and experienced a sensation of vindictive satisfaction.

"Well," he said, with a queer note of re-

gret in his voice, "that's too bad. But I reckon I'll be seeing you again anyway, if the sheriff doesn't get me."

"Do you think they will come for you to-night?" she asked, suddenly remembering that her father had told her that Duncan had gone to Lazette for the sheriff. "What will they do?"

"Nothing, I reckon. That is, they won't do anything except take me into custody. They can't do anything until Doubler dies."

"If he doesn't die?" she said. "What can they do then?"

"Usually it isn't considered a crime to shoot a man—if he doesn't die. Likely they wouldn't do anything to me if Doubler gets well. They might want me to leave the country. But I don't reckon that I'm going to let them take me—whether Doubler dies or not. Once they've got a man it's pretty easy to prove him guilty—in this country. Usually they hang a man and consider the evidence afterward. I'm not letting them do that to me. If I was guilty, I suppose I might look at it differently, but maybe not."

Sheila was silent; he became silent, too, and looked gravely at her.

"Well," he said presently, "I'll be going." He urged his pony forward, but when it had gone only a few steps he turned and looked back at her. "Do your best to keep Doubler alive," he said.

There was a note of the old mockery in his voice, and it lingered long in Sheila's ears after she had watched him vanish into the mysterious shadows that surrounded the trail. Stiffling a sigh of regret and pity, she spoke to her pony, and the animal shuffled down the long slope, forded the river, and so brought her to the door of Doubler's cabin.

The doctor was there; he was bending over Doubler at the instant Sheila entered the cabin, and he looked up at her with grave, questioning eyes.

"I am going to nurse him," she informed the doctor.

"That's good," he returned softly; "he needs lots of care—the care that a woman can give him.

Then he went off into a maze of medical terms and phrases that left her confused,

but out of which she gathered the fact that the bullet had missed a vital spot, that Doubler was suffering more from shock than from real injury, and that the only danger—his constitution being strong enough to withstand the shock—would be from blood poisoning. He had some fever, the doctor told Sheila, and he left a small vial on a shelf with instructions to administer a number of drops of its contents in a spoonful of water if Doubler became restless. The bandages were to be changed several times a day, and the wound bathed.

The doctor was glad that she had come, for he had a very sick patient in Mrs. Moreland, and he must return to her immediately. He would try to look in in a day or two. No, he said, in answer to her question, she could not leave Doubler to-morrow, even to go home—if she wanted the patient to get well.

And so Sheila watched him as he went out and saddled his horse and rode away down the river trail. Then with a sigh she returned to the cabin, closed the door, and took up her vigil beside the nester.

CHAPTER XVI

SHERIFF ALLEN TAKES A HAND

THE sheriff's posse—three men whom he had deputized in Lazette and himself—had ridden hard over the twenty miles of rough trail from Lazette, for Duncan had assured Allen that he would have to get into action before Dakota could discover that there had been a witness to his deed, and therefore when they arrived at the edge of the clearing near Dakota's cabin at midnight, they were glad of an opportunity to dismount and stretch themselves.

There was no light in Dakota's cabin, no sign that the man the sheriff was after was anywhere about, and the latter consulted gravely with his men.

"This ain't going to be any picnic, boys," he said. "We've got to take our time and keep our eyes open. Dakota ain't no spring chicken, and if he don't want to come with

us peaceable, he'll make things plumb lively."

A careful examination of the horses in the corral resulted in the discovery of one which had evidently been ridden hard and unsaddled but a few minutes before, for its flanks were in a lather and steam rose from its sides.

However, the discovery of the pony told the sheriff nothing beyond the fact that Dakota had ridden to the cabin from somewhere, some time before. Whether he was asleep, or watching the posse from some vantage point within or outside of the cabin was not quite clear. Therefore Allen, the sheriff, a man of much experience, advised caution. After another careful reconnoiter, which settled beyond all reasonable doubt the fact that Dakota was not secreted in the timber in the vicinity of the cabin, Allen told his deputies to remain concealed on the edge of the clearing, while he proceeded boldly to the door of the cabin and knocked loudly. He and Dakota had always been very friendly.

At the sound of the knock, Dakota's voice came from within the cabin, burdened with mockery.

"Sorry, Allen," it said, "but I'm locked up for the night. Can't take any chances on leaving my door unbarred—can't tell who's prowling around. If you'd sent word, now, so I would have had time to dress decently, I might have let you in, seeing it's you. I'm sure some sorry."

"Sorry, too." Allen grinned at the door. "I told the boys you'd be watching. Well, it can't be helped, I reckon. Only, I'd like mighty well to see you. Coming out in the morning?"

"Maybe. Missed my beauty sleep already." His voice was dryly sarcastic. "It's too bad you rode this far for nothing; can't even get a look at me. But it's no time to visit a man, anyway. You and your boys flop outside. We'll swap palaver in the morning. Good night."

"Good night."

Allen returned to the edge of the clearing, where he communicated to his men the result of the conference.

"He ain't allowing that he wants to be disturbed just now," he told them. "And he's too damned polite to monkey with."

We'll wait. Likely he'll change his mind over-night."

"Wait nothing," growled Duncan. "Bust the door in!"

Allen grinned mildly. "Good advice," he said quietly. "Me and my men will set here while you do the busting. Don't imagine that we'll be sore because you take the lead in such a little matter as that."

"If I was the sheriff——" began Duncan.

"Sure," interrupted Allen with a dry laugh; "if you was the sheriff. There's a lot of things we'd do if we was somebody else. Maybe breaking down Dakota's door is one of them. But we don't want anyone killed if we can help it, and it's a dead sure thing that some one would cash in if we tried any monkey business with that door. If you're wanting to do something that amounts to something to help this game along, swap your cayuse for one of Dakota's and hit the breeze to the Double R for grub. We'll be needing it by the time you get back."

Duncan had already ridden over sixty miles within the past twenty-four hours, and

he made a grumbling rejoinder. But in the end he roped one of Dakota's horses, saddled it, and presently vanished in the darkness. Allen and his men built a fire near the edge of the clearing and rolled into their blankets.

At eight o'clock the following morning, Langford appeared on the river trail, leading a pack horse loaded with provisions and cooking utensils for the sheriff and his men. Duncan, Langford told Allen while they breakfasted, had sought his bunk, being tired from the day's activities.

"You're the owner of the Double R?" questioned Allen.

"You and Dakota friendly?" he questioned again, noting Langford's nod.

"We've been quite friendly," smiled Langford.

"But you ain't now?"

"Not since this has happened. We must have law and order, even at the price of friendship."

Allen squinted a mildly hostile eye at Langford. "That's a good principle to get back of—for a weak-kneed friendship. But

most men who have got friends wouldn't let a little thing like law and order interfere between them."

Langford reddened. "I haven't known Dakota long of course," he defended. "Perhaps I erred in saying we were friends. Acquaintances would better describe it I think."

Allen's eye narrowed again with an emotion that Langford could not fathom. "I always had a heap of faith in Dakota's judgment," he said. And then, when Langford's face flushed with a realization of the subtle insult, Allen said gruffly:

"You say Doubler's dead?"

"I don't remember to have said that to you," returned Langford, his voice snapping with rage. "What I did say was that Duncan saw him killed and came to me with the news. I sent him for you. Since then my daughter has been over to Doubler's cabin. He is quite dead, she reported," he lied. "There can be no doubt of his guilt, if that is what bothers you," he continued. "Duncan saw him shoot Doubler in the back with Doubler's own rifle, and my daughter

heard the shot and met Dakota coming from Doubler's cabin, immediately after. It's a clear case, it seems to me,"

"Yes, clear," said Allen. "The evidence is all against him."

Yet it was not all quite clear to Langford. To be sure, he had expected to receive news that Dakota had accomplished the destruction of Doubler, but he had not anticipated the fortunate appearance of Duncan at the nester's cabin during the commission of the murder, nor had he expected Sheila to be near the scene of the crime. It had turned out better than he had planned, for since he had burned the agreement that he had made with Dakota, the latter had no hold on him whatever, and if it were finally proved that he had committed the crime there would come an end to both Dakota and Doubler.

Only one thing puzzled him. Dakota had been to his place, he knew that he was charged with the murder and that the agreement had been burned. He also knew that Duncan and Sheila would bear witness against him. And yet, though he had had

an opportunity to escape, he had not done so. Why not?

He put this interrogation to Allen, carefully avoiding reference to anything which would give the sheriff any idea that he possessed any suspicion that Dakota was not really guilty.

"That's what's bothering me!" declared the latter. "He's had time enough to hit the breeze clear out of the Territory. Though," he added, squinting at Langford, "Dakota ain't never been much on the run. He'd a heap rather face the music. Damn the cuss!" he exploded impatiently.

He finished his breakfast in silence, and then again approached the door of Dakota's cabin, knocking loudly, as before.

"I'm wanting that palaver now, Dakota," he said coaxingly.

He heard Dakota laugh. "Have you viewed the corpse, Allen?" came his voice, burdened with mockery.

"No," said Allen.

"You're a hell of a sheriff—wanting to take a man when you don't know whether he's done anything."

318 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

"I reckon you ain't fooling me none," said Allen slowly. The evidence is dead against you."

"What evidence?"

"Duncan saw you fixing Doubler, and Langford's daughter met you coming from his cabin."

"Who told you that?"

"Langford. He's just brought some grub over."

The silence that followed Allen's words lasted long, and the sheriff fidgeted impatiently. When he again spoke there was the sharpness of intolerance in his voice.

"If talking to you was all I had to do, I might monkey around here all summer," he said. "I've give you about eight hours to think this thing over, and that's plenty long enough. I don't like to get into any gun argument with you, because I know that somebody will get hurt. Why in hell don't you surrender decently? I'm a friend of yours and you hadn't ought to want to make any trouble for me. And them's good boys that I've got over there and I wouldn't want to see any of them perforated. And I'd

hate like blazes to have to put you out of business. Why don't you act decent and come out like a man?"

"Go and look at the corpse," insisted Dakota.

"There'll be plenty of time to look at the corpse after you're took."

There was no answer. Allen sighed regretfully. "Well," he said presently, "I've done what I could. From now on, I'm looking for you."

"Just a minute, Allen," came Dakota's voice. To Allen's surprise he heard a fumbling at the fastenings of the door, and an instant later it swung open and Dakota stood in the opening, one of his six-shooters in hand.

"I reckon I know you well enough to be tolerably sure that you'll get me before you leave here," he said, as Allen wheeled and faced him, his arms folded over his chest as a declaration of his present peaceful intentions. "But I want you to get this business straight before anything is started. And then you'll be responsible. I'm giving it to you straight. Somebody's framed up

on me. I didn't shoot Doubler. When I left him he was cleaning his rifle. After I left him I heard shooting. I thought it was him trying his rifle, or I would have gone back.

"Then I met Sheila Langford on the river trail, near the cabin. She'd heard the shooting, too. She thinks I did it. You think I did it, and Duncan says he saw me do it. Doubler isn't dead. At least he wasn't dead when I left the doctor with him at sundown. But he wasn't far from it, and if he dies without coming to it's likely that things will look bad for me. But because I knew he wasn't dead I took a chance on staying here. I am not allowing that I'm going to let anyone hang me for a thing I didn't do, and so if you're determined to get me without making sure that Doubler's going to have mourners immediately, it's a dead sure thing that some one's going to get hurt. I reckon that's all. I've given you fair warning, and after you get back to the edge of the clearing our friendship don't count any more."

He stepped back and closed the door.

Allen walked slowly toward the clearing, thinking seriously. He said nothing to Langford or his men concerning his conversation with Dakota, and though he covertly questioned the former he could discover nothing more than that which the Double R owner had already told him. Several times during the morning he was on the point of planning an attack on the cabin, but Dakota's voice had a ring of truth in it and he delayed action, waiting for some more favorable turn of events.

And so the hours dragged. The men lounged in the shade of the trees and talked; Langford—though he had no further excuse for staying—remained, concealing his impatience over Allen's inaction by taking short rides, but always returning; Allen, taciturn, morose even, paid no attention to him.

The afternoon waned; the sun descended to the peaks of the mountains, and there was still inaction on Allen's part, still silence from the cabin. Just at sundown Allen called his men to him and told them to guard the cabin closely, not to shoot unless forced

by Dakota, but to be certain that he did not escape.

He said they might expect him to return by dawn of the following morning. Then, during Langford's absence on one of his rides, he loped his pony up the river trail toward Ben Doubler's cabin.

CHAPTER XVII

DOUBLER TALKS

AFTER the departure of the doctor Sheila entered the cabin and closed the door, fastening the bars and drawing a chair over near the table. Doubler seemed to be resting easier, though there was a flush in his cheeks that told of the presence of fever. However, he breathed more regularly and with less effort than before the coming of the doctor, and as a consequence, Sheila felt decidedly better. At intervals during the night she gave him quantities of the medicine which the doctor had left, but only when the fever seemed to increase, forcing the liquid through his lips. Several times she changed the bandages, and once or twice during the night when he moaned she pulled her chair over beside him and smoothed his forehead, soothing him.

324 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

When the dawn came it found her heavy eyed and tired.

She went to the river and procured fresh water, washed her hands and face, prepared a breakfast of bacon and soda biscuit,—which she found in a tin box in a corner of the cabin, and then, as Doubler seemed to be doing nicely, she saddled her pony and took a short gallop. Returning, she entered the cabin, to find Doubler tossing restlessly.

She gave him a dose of the medicine—an extra large one—but it had little effect, quieting him only momentarily. Evidently he was growing worse. The thought aroused apprehension in her mind, but she fought it down and stayed resolutely at the sick man's side.

Through the slow-dragging hours of the morning she sat beside him, giving him the best care possible under the circumstances, but in spite of her efforts the fever steadily rose, and at noon he sat suddenly up in the bunk and gazed at her with blazing, vacuous eyes.

“You're a liar!” he shouted. “Dakota's square!”

Sheila stifled a scream of fear and shrank from him. But recovering, she went to him, seizing his shoulders and forcing him back into the bunk. He did not resist, not seeming to pay any attention to her at all, but he mumbled, inexpressively:

“It ain’t so, I tell you. He’s just left me, an’ any man which could talk like he talked to me ain’t—I reckon not,” he said, shaking his head with a vigorous, negative motion; “you’re a heap mistaken—you ain’t got him right at all.”

He was quiet for a time after this, but toward the middle of the afternoon Sheila saw that his gaze was following her as she paced softly back and forth in the cabin.

“So you’re stuck on that Langford girl, are you?” he demanded, laughing. “Well, it won’t do you any good, Dakota, she’s—well, she’s some sore at you for something. She won’t listen to anything which is said about you.” The laughter died out of his eyes; they became cold with menace. “I ain’t listenin’ to any more of that sorta talk, I tell you! I’ve got my eyes open. Why!” he said in surprise, starting up, “he’s gone!”

He suddenly shuddered and cursed. "In the back," he said. "You—you——" And profanity gushed from his lips. Then he collapsed, closing his eyes, and lay silent and motionless.

Out of the jumble of disconnected sentences Sheila was able to gather two things of importance—perhaps three.

The first was that some one had told him of Dakota's complicity in the plan to murder him and that he refused to believe his friend capable of such depravity. The second was that he knew who had shot him; he also knew the man who had informed him of Dakota's duplicity—though this knowledge would amount to very little unless he recovered enough to be able to supply the missing threads.

Sheila despaired of him supplying anything, for it seemed that he was steadily growing worse, and when the dusk came she began to feel a dread of remaining with him in the cabin during the night. If only the doctor would return! If Dakota would come—Duncan, her father, anybody! But nobody came, and the silence around the

cabin grew so oppressive that she felt she must scream. When darkness succeeded dusk she lighted the kerosene lamp, placed a bar over the window, secured the door fastenings, and seated herself at the table, determined to take a short nap.

It seemed that she had scarcely dropped off to sleep—though in reality she had been unconscious for more than two hours—when she awoke suddenly, to see Doubler sitting erect in the bunk, watching her with a wan, sympathetic smile. There was the light of reason in his eyes and her heart gave an ecstatic leap.

“Could you give me a drink of water, ma’am?” he said, in the voice that she knew well.

She sprang to the pail, to find that it contained very little. She had lifted it, and was about to unfasten the door, intending to go to the river to procure fresh water, when Doubler’s voice arrested her.

“There’s some water there—I can hear it splashin’: It’ll do well enough just now. I don’t want much. You can get some fresh after a while. I want to talk to you.”

She placed the pail down and went over to him, standing beside him.

"What is it?" she asked.

"How long have you been here? I knowed you was here all the time—I kept seein' you, but somehow things was a little mixed. But I know that you've been here quite a while. How long?"

"This is the second night."

"You found me layin' there—in the door. I dropped there, not bein' able to go any further. I felt you touchin' me—draggin' me. There was someone else here, too. Who was it?"

"The doctor and Dakota."

"Where's Dakota now?"

"At his cabin, I suppose. He didn't stay here long—he left right after he brought the doctor. I imagine you know why he didn't stay. He was afraid that you would recognize him and accuse him."

"Accuse him of what, ma'am?"

"Of shooting you."

He smiled. "I reckon, ma'am, that you don't understand. It wasn't Dakota that shot me."

“Who did, then?” she questioned eagerly. “Who?”

“Duncan.”

“Why—why——” she said, sitting suddenly erect, a mysterious elation filling her, her eyes wide with surprise and delight, and a fear that Doubler might have been mistaken—“Why, I saw Dakota on the river trail just after you were shot.”

“He’d just left me. He hadn’t been gone more than ten minutes or so when Duncan rode up—comin’ out of the timber just down by the crick. Likely he’d been hidin’ there. I was cleanin’ my rifle; we had words, and when I set my rifle down just outside the shack, he grabbed it an’ shot me. After that I don’t seem to remember a heap, except that someone was touchin’ me—which must have been you.”

“Oh!” she said. “I am so glad!”

She was thinking now of Dakota’s parting words to her the night before on the crest of the slope above the river,—of his words, of the truth of his statement denying his guilt, and she was glad that she had not spoken some of the spiteful things which

had been in her mind. How she had misjudged him!

"I reckon it's something to be glad for," smiled Doubler, misunderstanding her elation, "but I reckon I owe it to you—I'd have pulled my freight sure, if you hadn't come when you did. An' I told you not to be comin' here any more." He laughed. "Ain't it odd how things turn out—sometimes. I'd have died sure," he repeated.

"You are going to live a long while," she said. And then, to his surprise, she bent over and kissed his forehead, leaving his side instantly, her cheeks aflame, her eyes alight with a mysterious fire. To conceal her emotion from Doubler she seized the water pail.

"I will get some fresh water," she said, with a quick, smiling glance at him. "You'll want a fresh drink, and your bandages must be changed."

She opened the door and stepped down into the darkness.

There was a moon, and the trail to the river was light enough for her to see plainly, but when she reached the timber clump in which Doubler had said Duncan had been

hiding, she shuddered and made a detour to avoid passing close to it. This took her some distance out of her way, and she reached the river and walked along its bank for a little distance, searching for a deep accessible spot into which she could dip the pail.

The shallow crossing over which she had ridden many times was not far away, and when she stooped to fill the pail she heard a sudden clatter and splashing, and looked up to see a horseman riding into the water from the opposite side of the river.

He saw her at the instant she discovered him, and once over the ford he turned his horse and rode directly toward her.

After gaining the bank he halted his pony and looked intently at her.

"You're Langford's daughter, I reckon," he said.

"Yes," she returned, seeing that he was a stranger; "I am."

"I'm Ben Allen," he said shortly; "the sheriff of this county. What are you doing here?"

"I am taking care of Ben Doubler," she said; "he has been——"

"Then he ain't dead, of course," said Allen, interrupting her. It seemed to Sheila that there was relief and satisfaction in his voice, and she peered closer at him, but his face was hidden in the shadow of his hat brim.

"He is very much better now," she told him, scarcely able to conceal her delight. "But he has been very bad."

"Able to talk?"

"Yes. He has just been talking to me." She took a step toward him, speaking earnestly and rapidly. "I suppose you are looking for Dakota," she said, remembering what her father had told her about sending Duncan to Lazette for the sheriff. "If you are looking for him, I want to tell you that he didn't shoot Doubler. It was Duncan. Doubler told me so not over five minutes ago. He said——"

But Allen had spurred his pony forward, and before she could finish he was out of hearing distance, riding swiftly toward the cabin.

Sheila lingered at the water's edge, for now suddenly she saw much beauty in the

surrounding country, and she was no longer lonesome. She stood on the bank of the river, gazing long at the shadowy rims of the distant mountains, at their peaks, rising majestically in the luminous mist of the night; at the plains, stretching away and fading into the mysterious shadows of the distance; watching the waters of the river, shimmering like quicksilver—a band of glowing ribbon winding in and out and around the moon-touched buttes of the canyons.

“Oh!” she said irrelevantly, “he isn’t so bad, after all!”

Stooping over again to fill the pail, she heard a sharp clatter of hoofs behind her. A horseman was racing toward the river—toward her—bending low over his pony’s mane, riding desperately. She placed the pail down and watched him. Apparently he did not see her, for, swerving suddenly, he made for the crossing without slackening speed. He had almost reached the water’s edge when there came a spurt of flame from the door of Doubler’s cabin, followed by the sharp whip like crack of a rifle!

334 *THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY*

In the doorway of the cabin, clearly outlined against the flickering light of the interior, was a man. And as Sheila watched another streak of fire burst from the door, and she heard the shrill sighing of the bullet, heard the horseman curse. But he did not stop in his flight, and in an instant he had crossed the river. She saw him for an instant as he was outlined against the clear sky in the moonlight that bathed the crest of the slope, and then he was gone.

Dropping the pail, Sheila ran toward the cabin, fearing that Doubler had suddenly become delirious and had attacked Allen. But it seemed to her that it had not been Allen who had raced away from the cabin, and she had not gone more than half way toward it when she saw another horseman coming. She halted to wait for him, and when he halted and drew up beside her she saw that it was the sheriff.

"Who was it?" she demanded, breathlessly.

"Duncan!" Allen cursed picturesquely and profanely. "When I got to the shack he was inside, standing over Doubler, strang-

ling him. The damned skunk! You was right," he added; "it was him who shot Doubler!" He continued rapidly, grimly, taking a piece of paper from a pocket and writing something on it.

"My men have got Dakota corraled in his cabin. If he tries to get away they will do for him. I don't want that to happen; there's too few square men in the country as it is. Take this"—he held out the paper to her—"and get down to Dakota's cabin with it. Give it to Bud—one of my men—and tell him to scatter the others and try to head off Duncan if he comes that way. I'm after him!"

The paper fluttered toward her, she snatched at it, missed it, and stooped to take it from the ground. When she stood erect she saw Allen and his pony silhouetted for an instant on the crest of the ridge on the other side of the river. Then he vanished.

CHAPTER XVIII

FOR DAKOTA

THOUGH in a state of anxiety and excitement over the incident of Duncan's attack on Doubler and the subsequent shooting, together with a realization of Dakota's danger, Sheila did not lose her composure. She ran to the river and secured the water, aware that it might be needed now more than ever. Then, hurrying as best she could with the weight of the pail, she returned to the cabin.

She was relieved to find that Doubler had received no injury, and she paused long enough to allow him to tell her that Duncan had entered the cabin shortly after she had left it. He had attacked Doubler, but had been interrupted by Allen, who had suddenly ridden up. Duncan had heard him coming, and had concealed himself behind

the door, and when Allen had entered Duncan had struck him on the head with the butt of his six-shooter, knocking him down. The blow had been a glancing one, however, and Allen had recovered quickly, seizing Doubler's rifle and trying to bring down the would be murderer as he fled.

While attending to Doubler's bandages, Sheila repeated the conversation she had had with Allen concerning the situation in which he had left Dakota, and instantly the nester's anxiety for his friend took precedence over any thoughts for his own immediate welfare.

"There'll be trouble sure, now that Allen's left there," he said. "Dakota won't be a heap easy with them deputies."

He told Sheila to let the bandaging go until later, but she refused.

"Dakota'll be needin' you a heap more than I need you," he insisted, refusing to allow her to touch the bandages. "There'll be the devil to pay if any of them deputies try to rush Dakota's shack. I want you to go down there right now. If you wait, it'll mebbe be too late."

Sheila hesitated for a moment, and then, yielding to the entreaty in Doubler's eyes, she was at his side, pressing his hand.

"Ride ma'am!" he told her, when she was ready to go, his cheeks flushed with excitement, his eyes bright.

Her pony snorted with surprise when she brought her riding whip down against its flanks when turning from the corral gates, but it needed no second urging, and its pace when it splashed through the shallow water of the crossing was fully as great as that of Duncan's pony, which had previously passed through it.

Once on the hard sand of the river trail it settled into a long, swinging gallop, under which the miles flew by rapidly and steadily. Sheila drew the animal up on the rises, breathing it sometimes, but on the levels she urged it with whip and spur, and in something more than an hour after leaving Doubler's cabin, she flashed by the quicksand crossing, which she estimated as being not more than twelve miles from her journey's end.

She was tired after her long vigil at Doub-

ler's side, but the weariness was entirely physical, for her brain was working rapidly, filling her thoughts with picturesque conjectures, drawing pictures in which she saw Dakota being shot down by Allen's deputies. And he was innocent!

She did not blame herself for Dakota's dilemma, though she felt a keen regret over her treatment of him, over her unjust suspicions. He had really been in earnest when he had told her the night before on the river trail that he was not guilty—that everybody had misjudged him. Vivid in her recollection was the curious expression on his face when he had said to her just before leaving her that night:

“Won't you believe me?”

And that other time, when he had taken her by the shoulders and looked steadily into her eyes—she remembered that, too; she could almost feel his fingers, and the words he had uttered then were fresh in her memory: “I've treated you mean, Sheila; about as mean as a man could treat a woman. I am sorry. I want you to believe that. And maybe some day—when this

business is over—you'll understand, and forgive me."

There had been mystery in his actions ever since she had seen him the first time, and though she could not yet understand it, she had discovered that there were forces at work in his affairs which seemed to indicate that he had not told her that for the purpose of attempting to justify his previous actions.

Evidently, whatever the mystery that surrounded him, her father and Duncan were concerned in it, and this thought spurred her on, for it gave her a keen delight to think that she was arrayed against them, even though she were on the side of the man who had wronged her. He, at least, had not been concerned in the plot to murder Doubler.

When she reached the last rise—on the crest of which she had sat on her pony on the morning following her marriage to Dakota in the cabin and from which she had seen the parson riding away—she was trembling with eagerness and dread for fear that something might happen before she

could arrive. It was three miles down the slope, and when she reached the level there was Dakota's cabin before her.

She drew her pony to a walk, for she saw men grouped in front of the cabin door, saw Dakota there himself, standing in the open doorway, framed in the light from within. There were no evidences of the conflict which she had dreaded. She had arrived in time.

Convinced of this, she felt for the first time her physical weariness, and she leaned forward on her pony, holding to its mane for support, approaching the cabin slowly.

Her father was there, she observed, as she drew nearer; and three strangers—and Allen! And near Allen, sitting on his horse dejectedly, was Duncan!

One of Duncan's arms swung oddly at his side, and Sheila thought instantly of his curse when he had been riding near her at the river crossing. Evidently Allen's bullet had struck him.

Sheila's presence at Dakota's cabin was now unnecessary, for it was evident that an understanding had been reached with Allen,

and Sheila experienced a sudden aversion to appearing among the men. Turning her pony, she was about to ride away, intending to return to Doubler's cabin, when Allen turned and saw her. He spurred quickly to her side, seizing the pony by the bridle rein and leading it toward the cabin door.

"It's all right, ma'am," he said, "I got him. Holy smoke!" he exclaimed as she came within the radius of the light. "You certainly rode some, didn't you, ma'am?"

She did not answer. She saw her father look at her, noted his start, smiled scornfully when she observed a paleness overspreading his face. She looked from him to Duncan, and the latter flushed and turned his head. Then Allen's voice reached her, as he spoke to Dakota.

"This young woman has rode twenty miles to-night—to save your hide—you durned cuss. If you was anyways hospitable, you'd——"

Allen's voice seemed to grow distant to Sheila, the figures of the men in the group blurred, the light danced, she reeled in the saddle, tried to check herself, failed, and

toppled limply forward over her pony's neck. She heard an exclamation, saw Dakota spring suddenly from the doorway, felt his arms around her. She struggled in his grasp, trying to fight him off, and then she drifted into oblivion.

CHAPTER XIX

SOME MEMORIES

WHEN Sheila recovered consciousness she was in Dakota's cabin—in the bunk in which she had lain on another night in the yesterday of her life in this country. She recognized it instantly. There was the candle on the table, there were the familiar chairs, the fireplace, the shelves upon which were Dakota's tobacco tins and matches; there was the guitar, with its gaudy string, suspended from the wall. If it had been raining, she might have imagined that she was just awakening from a sleep in that other time. She felt a hand on her forehead, a damp cloth, and she opened her eyes to gaze fairly into Dakota's.

"Don't, please," she said, shrinking from him.

It occurred to her that she had uttered

the same words to him before, and, closing her eyes for a moment, she remembered. It had been when he had tried to assist her out of the water at the quicksand crossing, and as on that occasion, his answer was the same.

“Then I won’t.”

She lay for a long time, looking straight up at the ceiling, utterly tired, wondering vaguely what had become of her father, Duncan, Allen, and the others. She would have given much to have been able to lie there for a time—a long time—and rest. But that was not to be thought of. She struggled to a sitting position, and when her eyes had become accustomed to the light she saw her father sitting in a chair near the fireplace. The door was closed—barred. Sheila glanced again at her father, and then questioningly at Dakota, who was watching her from the center of the room, his face inscrutable.

“What does this mean? Where are the others?” she demanded.

“Allen and his men have gone back to Lazette,” returned Dakota quietly. “This means”—he pointed to Langford—“that

we're going to have a little talk—about things.”

Sheila rose. “I don't care to hear any talk; I am not interested.”

“You'll be interested in *my* talk,” said Dakota.

Curiously, he seemed to be invested with a new character. Just now he was more like the man he had been the night she had met him the first time—before he had forced her to marry him—than he had been since. Only, she felt as she watched him standing quietly in the middle of the room, the recklessness which had marked his manner that other time seemed to have entirely disappeared, seemed to have been replaced by something else—determination.

Beneath the drooping mustache Sheila saw the lines of his lips; they had always seemed hard to her, and now there were little curves at the corners which hinted at amusement—grim amusement. His eyes, too, were different; the mockery had departed from them. They were steady and unwavering, as before, and though they still baffled her, she was certain that she saw a

slumbering devil in them—as though he possessed some mysterious knowledge and purposed to confound Sheila and her father with it, though in his own way and to suit his convenience. Yet behind it all there lurked a certain gravity—a cold deliberation that seemed to proclaim that he was in no mood to trifle and that he proposed to follow some plan and would brook no interference.

Fascinated by the change in him Sheila resumed her seat on the edge of the bunk, watching him closely. He drew a chair over near the door, tilted it back and dropped into it, thus mutely announcing that he intended keeping the prisoners until he had delivered himself of that mysterious knowledge which seemed to be in his mind.

Glancing furtively at her father, Sheila observed that he appeared to have formed some sort of a conclusion regarding Dakota's actions also, for he sat very erect on his chair, staring at the latter, an intense interest in his eyes.

Sheila had become interested, too; she had forgotten her weariness. And yet Dakota's

first words disappointed her—somehow they seemed irrelevant.

“This isn’t such a big world, after all, is it?” He addressed both Sheila and her father, though he looked at neither. His tone was quietly conversational, and when he received no answer to his remark he looked up with a quiet smile.

“That has been said by a great many people, hasn’t it? I’ve heard it many times. I reckon you have, too. But it’s a fact, just the same. The world *is* a small place. Take us three. You”—he said, pointing to Langford—“come out here from Albany and buy a ranch. You”—he smiled at Sheila—“came with your father as a matter of course. You”—he looked again at Langford—“might have bought a ranch in another part of the country. You didn’t need to buy this particular one. But you did. Take me. I spent five years in Dakota before I came here. I’ve been here five years.

“A man up in Dakota wanted me to stay there; said he’d do most anything for me if I would. But I didn’t like Dakota; some-

thing kept telling me that I ought to move around a little. I came here, I liked the place, and I've stayed here. I know that neither of you are very much interested in what has happened to me, but I've told you that much just to prove my contention about the world being a small place. It surely isn't so very big when you consider that three persons can meet up like we've met—our trails leading us to the same section of the country."

"I don't see how that concerns us," said Langford impatiently.

"No," returned Dakota, and now there was a note of sarcasm in his voice, "you don't see. Lots of folks don't see. But there are trails that lead everywhere. Fate marks them out—blazes them. There are trails that lead us into trouble, others that lead us to pleasure—straight trails, crooked ones, trails that cross—all kinds. Folks start out on a crooked trail, trying to get away from something, but pretty soon another trail crosses the one they are on—maybe it will be a straight one that crosses theirs, with a straight man riding it.

"The man riding the crooked trail and the man riding the straight one meet at the place where the trails cross. Such trails don't lead to any to-morrow; they are yesterday's trails, and before the man riding the crooked trail and the man riding the straight trail can go any further there has got to be an accounting. That is what has happened here. You"—he smiled gravely as he looked at Langford—"have been riding a crooked trail. I have been hanging onto the straight one as best I could. Now we've got to where the trails cross."

"Meaning that you want an explanation of my action in burning that signed agreement, I suppose?" sneered Langford, looking up.

"Still trying to ride the crooked trail?" smiled Dakota, with the first note of mockery that Sheila had heard in his voice since he had begun speaking. "I'm not worrying a bit about that agreement. Why, man, I'd have shot myself before I'd have shot Doubler. He's my friend—the only real friend I've had in ten years."

"Then when you signed the agreement

you didn't mean to keep it?" questioned Langford incautiously, disarmed by Dakota's earnestness.

"Ten years ago a boy named Ned Keegles went to Dakota. I am glad to see that you are familiar with the name," he added with a smile as Langford started and stiffened in his chair, his face suddenly ashen. "You knowing Keegles will save me explaining a lot," continued Dakota. "Well, Keegles went to Dakota—where I was. He was eighteen and wasn't very strong, as young men go. But he got a job punching cows and I got to know him pretty well—used to bunk with him. He took a liking to me because I took an interest in him.

"He didn't like the work, because he had been raised differently. He lived in Albany before he went West. His father, William Keegles, was in the hardware business with a man named Langford—David Dowd Langford. You see, I couldn't be mistaken in the name of the man; it's such an uncommon one."

He smiled significantly at Sheila, and an odd expression came into her face, for she

remembered that on the night of her coming he had made the same remark.

"One day Ned Keegles got sick and took me into his confidence. He wasn't in the West for his health, he said. He was a fugitive from the law, accused of murdering his father. It wasn't a nice story to hear, but he told it, thinking he was going to die."

Dakota smiled enigmatically at Sheila and coldly at the now shrinking man seated in the chair beside the fireplace.

"One day Keegles went into his father's office. His father's partner, David Dowd Langford, was there, talking to his father. They'd had hard words. Keegle's father had discovered that Langford had appropriated a large sum of the firm's money. By forging his partner's signature he had escaped detection until one day when the elder Keegles had accidentally discovered the fraud—which was the day on which Ned Keegles visited his father. It isn't necessary to go into detail, but it was perfectly plain that Langford was guilty.

"There were hard words, as I have said. The elder Keegles threatened to prosecute.

Langford seized a sample knife that had been lying on the elder Keegle's desk, and stabbed him, killing him instantly. Then, while Ned Keegles stood by, stunned by the suddenness of the attack, Langford coolly walked to a telephone and notified the police of the murder. Hanging up the receiver, he raised the hue and cry, and a dozen clerks burst into the office, to find Ned Keegles bending over his father, trying to withdraw the knife.

"Langford accused Ned Keegles of the murder. He protested, of course, but seeing that the evidence was against him, he fought his way out of the office and escaped. He went to Dakota—where I met him." He hesitated and looked steadily at Langford. "Do you see how the trails have crossed? The crooked one and the straight one?"

Langford was leaning forward in his chair, a scared, wild expression in his eyes, his teeth and hands clenched in an effort to control his emotions.

"It's a lie!" he shouted. "I didn't kill him! Ned Keegles——"

"Wait!" Dakota rose from his chair and walked to a shelf, from which he took a box, returning to Langford's side and opening it. He drew out a knife, shoving it before Langford's eyes and pointing out some rust spots on the blade.

"This knife was given to me by Ned Keegles," he said slowly. "These rust spots on the blade are from his father's blood. Look at them!" he said sharply, for Langford had turned his head.

At the command he swung around, his gaze resting on the knife. "That's a pretty story," he sneered.

Dakota's laugh when he returned the knife to the box chilled Sheila as that same laugh had chilled her when she had heard it during her first night in the country—in this same cabin, with Dakota sitting at the table—a bitter, mocking laugh that had in it a savagery controlled by an iron will. He turned abruptly and walked to his chair, seating himself.

"Yes," he said, "it's a pretty story. But it hasn't all been told. With a besmirched name and the thoughts which were with him

all the time, life wasn't exactly a joyful one for Ned Keegles. He was young, you see, and it all preyed on his mind. But after a while it hardened him. He'd hit town with the rest of the boys, and he'd drink whiskey until he'd forget. But he couldn't forget long. He kept seeing his father and Langford; nights he'd start from his blankets, living over and over again the incident of the murder. He got so he couldn't stay in Dakota. He came down here and tried to forget. It was just the same—there was no forgetfulness.

“One night when he was on the trail near here, he met a woman. It was raining and the woman had lost the trail. He took the woman in. She interested him, and he questioned her. He discovered that she was the daughter of the man who had murdered his father—the daughter of David Dowd Langford!”

Langford cringed and looked at Sheila, who was looking straight at Dakota, her eyes alight with knowledge.

“Ned Keegles kept his silence, as he had kept it for ten years,” resumed Dakota.

“But the coming of the woman brought back the bitter memories, and while the woman slept in his cabin he turned to the whiskey bottle for comfort. As he drank his troubles danced before him—magnified. He thought it would be a fine revenge if he should force the woman to marry him, for he figured that it would be a blow at the father’s pride. If it hadn’t been for a cowardly parson and the whiskey the marriage would never have occurred—Ned Keegles would not have thought of it. But he didn’t hurt the woman; she left him pure as she came—mentally and physically.”

Langford slowly rose from his chair, his lips twitching, his face working strangely, his eyes wide and glaring.

“You say she married him—Ned Keegles?” he said, his voice high keyed and shrill. He turned to Sheila after catching Dakota’s nod. “Is this true?” he demanded sharply. “Did you marry him as this man says you did?”

“Yes; I married him,” returned Sheila dully, and Langford sank limply into his chair.

Dakota smiled with flashing eyes and continued:

“Keegles married the woman,” he said coldly, “because he thought she was Langford’s real daughter.” He looked at Sheila with a glance of compassion. “Later, when Keegles discovered that the woman was only Langford’s stepdaughter, he was mighty sorry. Not for Langford, however, because he could not consider Langford’s feelings. And in spite of what he had done he was still determined to secure revenge.

“One day Langford came to Keegles with a proposal. He had seen Keegles kill one man, and he wanted to hire him to kill another—a man named Doubler. Keegles agreed, for the purpose of getting Langford into——”

Dakota hesitated, for Langford had risen to his feet and stood looking at him, his eyes bulging, his face livid.

“You!” he said, in a choking, wailing voice; “you—you, are Ned Keegles! You—you—— Why——” he hesitated and passed a hand uncertainly over his forehead, looking from Sheila to Dakota with glazed

eyes. "You—you are a liar!" he suddenly screamed, his voice raised to a maniacal pitch. "It isn't so! You—both of you—have conspired against me!"

"Wait!" Dakota got to his feet, walked to a shelf, and took down a small glass, a pair of shears, a shaving cup, and a razor. While Langford watched, staring at him with fearful, wondering eyes, Dakota deftly snipped off the mustache with the shears, lathered his lip, and shaved it clean. Then he turned and confronted Langford.

The latter looked at him with one, long, intense gaze, and then with a dry sob which caught in his throat and seemed to choke him, he covered his face with his hands, shuddered convulsively, and without a sound pitched forward, face down, at Dakota's feet.

CHAPTER XX

INTO THE UNKNOWN

AFTER a time Sheila rose from the bunk on which she had been sitting and stood in the center of the floor, looking down at her father. Dakota had not moved. He stood also, watching Langford, his face pale and grim, and he did not speak until Sheila had addressed him twice.

"What are you going to do now?" she said dully. "It is for you to say, you know. You hold his life in your hands."

"Do?" He smiled bitterly at her. "What would you do? I have waited ten years for this day. It must go on to the end."

"The end?"

"Yes; the end," he said gravely. "He"—Dakota pointed to the prostrate figure—"must sign a written confession."

“And then?”

“He will return to answer for his crime.”

Sheila shuddered and turned from him with bowed head.

“Oh!” she said at last; “it will be too horrible! My friends in the East—they will——”

“Your friends,” he said with some bitterness. “Could your friends say more than my friends said when they thought that I had murdered my own father in cold blood and then run away?”

“But I am innocent,” she pleaded.

“I was innocent,” he returned, with a grave smile.

“Yes, but I could not help you, you know, for I wasn’t there when you were accused. But you are here, and you can help me. Don’t you see,” she said, coming close to him, “don’t you see that the disgrace will not fall on him, but on me. I will make him sign the confession,” she offered, “you can hold it over him. He will make restitution of your property. But do not force him to go back East. Let him go somewhere—anywhere—but let him live.

For, after all, he is my father—the only one I ever knew.”

“But my vengeance,” he said, the bitterness of his smile softening as he looked down at her.

“Your vengeance?” She came closer to him, looking up into his face. “Are we to judge—to condemn? Will not the power which led us three together—the power which you are pleased to call ‘Fate’; the power that blazed the trail which you have followed from the yesterday of your life;—will not this power judge him—punish him? Please,” she pleaded, “please, for my sake, for—for”—her voice broke and she came forward and placed her hands on his shoulders—“for your wife’s sake.”

He looked down at her for an instant, the hard lines of his face breaking into gentle, sympathetic curves. Then his arms went around her, and she leaned against him, her head against his shoulder, while she wept softly.

.
An hour later, standing side by side in the open doorway of the cabin, Sheila and

Dakota watched in silence while Langford, having signed a confession dictated by Dakota, mounted his pony and rode slowly up the river trail toward Lazette.

He slowly passed the timber clump near the cabin, and with bowed head traveled up the long slope which led to the rise upon which, in another time, Sheila had caught her last glimpse of the parson. It was in the cold, bleak moment of the morning when darkness has not yet gone and the dawn not come, and Langford looked strangely desolate out there on the trail alone—alone with thoughts more desolate than his surroundings.

Sheila shivered and snuggled closer to Dakota. He looked down at her with a sympathetic smile.

“It is so lonesome,” she said.

“Where?” he asked.

“Out there—where he is going.”

Dakota did not answer. For a long time they watched the huddled form of the rider. They saw him approach the crest of the rise—reach it. Then from the mountains in the eastern distance came a shaft of light, strik-

ing the summit of the rise where the rider bestrode his pony—throwing both into bold relief. For a moment the rider halted the pony, turned, glanced back an instant, and was gone.

THE END

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY

Los Angeles

This book is DUE on the last date stamped below.

LD
URL JUN 9 1983

INTERLIBRARY LOANS

REC'D LD-URL

MAY 09 1983

JUN 27 1983

DUE TWO WEEKS FROM DATE OF RECEIPT

INTERLIBRARY LOANS

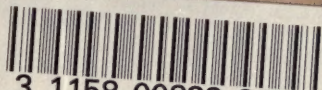
(CA)

JUL 9 1986

CONTRA COSTA CO L - PLEASE FILE
DUE TWO WEEKS FROM DATE OF RECEIPT

REC'D LD-URL

AUG 01 1986



3 1158 00833 3436

Q

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



AA 000 259 753 2

